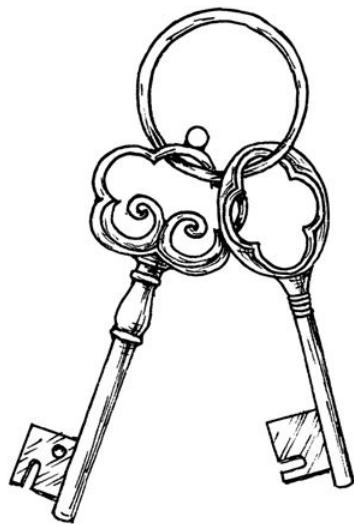




BROAD
STREET
BOARDING
HOUSE

Cassidy's
CALLING
CHRISTINE
STERLING



CASSIDY'S CALLING
The Broad Street Boarding House #3

Christine Sterling

CASSIDY'S CALLING

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Scriptures quoted from the King James Holy Bible.

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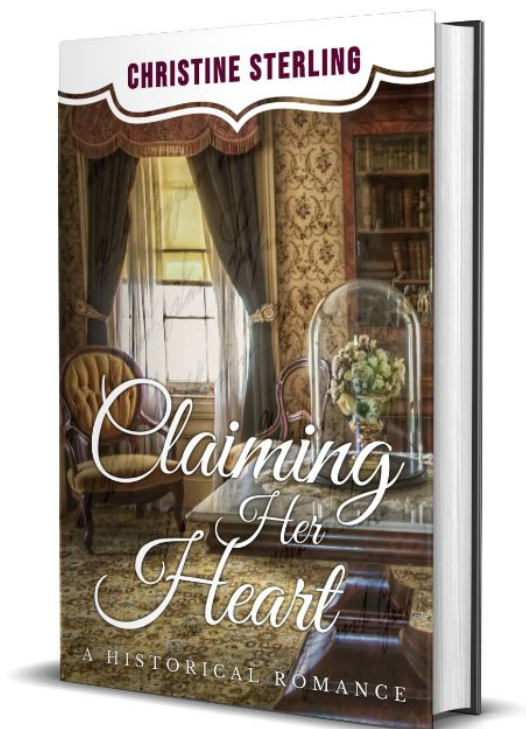
-- Christine Sterling

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Broad Street Boarding House series was created as a multi-author project by Amelia Adams to bring together a large cast of characters and many different writing styles and perspectives. It has been so fun to work with Amelia, to coordinate with the authors involved, and to hear all their fantastic story ideas. It's been especially fun to watch the characters come to life. Sophia and Sybil Cartwright are two of the most delightful ladies we've ever written about. We hope that you'll follow the series from start to finish, and if you'd like to [join our reader group](#), we'd love to have you!

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CASSIDY'S CALLING

A woman that despises the military; a man appointed to saving the souls at the largest military garrison in the west; the plague that forces them together.

Cassidy Blackwood has lost every man in her life due to the military or war. Even her brother decided he needed to take up arms, leaving Chicago for the coast of California. When she gets word that her brother has been injured, she doesn't think twice about traveling across the country to bring him home. What she doesn't count on is the quiet, reserved preacher who defends the very institution she despises!

Devlin Kingston was the newly appointed chaplain-in-training at the Presidio in San Francisco, California. As he prepared to oversee the souls of the fallen and wounded, nothing could sway him from the commitment he made to the church. Then why was a feisty redhead making him question his life choices?

When a plague forces them together in a small town, can Devlin and Cassidy put aside their differences to see the plans that God has for them both?



CHAPTER ONE



1875, Chicago, Illinois

Cassidy Blackwood stood silently beside the freshly covered burial plot and tried to catch her breath. She could hear the final words of the preacher giving the graveside service and sniffed. Even saying *amen* was too much of an effort right now.

The people started to leave, pausing to murmur their condolences, or touch her sleeve in sympathy.

If you need anything, just reach out.

I'm here when you are ready to talk.

You just need time to process everything.

The good Lord had a reason for taking Mrs. Blackwood.

She knew they meant well, and they secretly prayed that she wouldn't take them up on their offers to help. These were her parents' friends, not hers.

These people came to pay respects when her father, General Robert Blackwood III, had died six months prior from consumption. Now, they came to pay respects to Mama. Cassidy was still in shock that her mother had passed. Mama became ill shortly after losing her husband, but Cassidy simply thought it was melancholy. Eventually Mama just stopped eating and passed in her sleep.

Cassidy screamed at God for taking her parents, and she took little comfort that Mama was in Heaven with Daddy. When she was done, she sobbed in bed as Errietta rubbed her back. Now she looked to the older woman once more for comfort.

She wished her brother, Briley, was here. He would know what to do.

Briley was currently serving in the military and had not been home in nearly three years. Cassidy missed him. She wrote a letter, asking for him to come home when Daddy died and then again when Mama became ill. She wrote nearly half a dozen letters in all, and never received a single response.

She wondered how the military mail worked. She was sure that Briley had to receive at least *one* of her letters. Was there a reason she hadn't heard from him?

Her thoughts were interrupted when an older woman approached her. "Sweetheart," Errietta said, wrapping her arms around Cassidy's shoulders. "It was a beautiful service. Your Mama would be very pleased." Cassidy melted into the reassurance of Errietta's embrace. She was the closest thing Cassidy had to a mother, now that her mama was gone.

Errietta and her husband, George Schank, had worked for her parents for so long that they seemed to blend in like a second set of parents. Her father had hired them before the war. George worked as butler and Errietta had taken over the housekeeper role, connecting instantly with mama as they made choices together for the manor and preparations of the household. Society had always treated them as servants, but Robert and Jaclynn Blackwood called them family.

Feeling a hand on her shoulder Cassidy turned to see George holding open his arms. Cassidy embraced the old man and felt his lips brush against her hair.

"I'm tired," she said, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "We should head home."

George held onto one arm, Errietta the other as they guided Cassidy towards the Hansom cab they hired to travel from the house to the cemetery.

"Cassidy?" Errietta's voice broke through her thoughts in a way that clearly noted it had been repeated several times.

"Hm?" She was too tired to speak.

"I asked if you needed to stop anywhere on the way to the house?" George smiled gently at her.

She rubbed at her forehead. Everything was too foggy right now, as if she watched someone else's life play out before her. None of this truly seemed real. "I... Is there anything else that we must do today?" she said softly.

"There will be callers through the coming days, but George and I can attend to most of that." Errietta's hand reached out to smooth a loose hair behind Cassidy's ear, then settled to rub against her back.

"Then I would like to go home. I feel like I need to lay down."

She heard Errietta *tsk*, and step to the side as George opened the Hansom carriage door.

"Let's get you inside, Miss Cassidy," he said in his soothing voice. He held her arm as she stepped up inside the carriage, then he assisted Errietta into her seat beside Cassidy.

Cassidy sank into the plush velvet seats, leaned her head against the side panel and allowed the thoughts of the day to consume her. She closed her eyes and listened to Errietta and George softly

speaking.

“What are we going to do?” Errietta softly asked. Cassidy knew they wouldn’t have such a conversation if they thought she was listening.

She heard George shift in his seat. “We’ll do what we’ve always done. Robert was very clear that we would always have a home at Blackwood House, and we will continue on as we always have.”

Cassidy’s eyes fluttered open. “What about the house,” she asked. She barely knew anything about running a house. Mama and Errietta had always handled it. Suddenly the thought entered her head. *Did she even own the house? Would she have to move?* She wished she had more insight into these matters.

She wished Briley was here.

“We’ll meet with Mr. Cunningham at the bank next week.”

“Do I have to move?” Her voice was starting to rise. “Where would I go?”

“Calm yourself, child,” Errietta said, placing her hand on Cassidy’s arm. “You’ll move when you’re ready to. For now, you just need to rest, and we’ll take care of the other things.” Errietta attempted to soothe her, but she fidgeted.

“Is the bank going to come for the house now?” she asked, worrying her hands.

“I’m sure there are provisions for the house. We can’t do anything right now.” George leaned over and patted her knee as the carriage swayed. “Errietta is right. You should rest. Why don’t you close your eyes until we get home?”

Cassidy leaned back in the seat. She was too anxious to sleep, but she closed her eyes, as George suggested, and strained her ears to hear the rest of their conversation. Words swirled in her brain through the fog of her emotions.

Husband... mistress... home.

“Hush, Errietta,” George said in hushed whispers. “Cassidy is not demure, and she’s never been a wallflower. Our job is to offer guidance when asked and keep the house in order until she is ready to take over as mistress. Until Briley comes home, we are the only family that she has, and we will do right by her as you would have any of our own children.”

Yes, Cassidy thought, her eyes still closed. *This was her family until Briley came home. He needed to come home soon.*

She needed to let him know about Mama. Maybe she could send a telegram? Cassie silently scoffed. Telegrams cost money, and she didn’t even know what her current situation was until they spoke with

the bank.

Why did Briley have to join the military and move so far away? She hated the military, that's all there was to it. There was no need for wars or mixing communities. The military took her father away, and he wasn't the same man when he returned. He would never discuss what occurred and she saw it haunt him until it finally put him in the ground.

She didn't want that to happen to her brother.

What if he was dead? What if he never returned home?

Cassidy felt a tear roll down her cheek, but she was too tired to even swipe it away. She allowed the voices to fade and concentrated on the sound of the wheels against the cobbled streets. It wasn't long until she was fast asleep.



One week later

Cassidy stared at the letter, her fingers crumpling the paper as she held the edges tightly. Her eyes scanned the page once more looking for any clue from the Chaplain that might be hidden underneath the bold scratches.

Dear Mrs. Blackwood,

It is with a heavy heart that I write this letter to alert you that your son, First Lieutenant Briley Blackwood, has fallen ill with a serious fever, and is currently residing at the Presidio Infirmary. Lt. Blackwood will remain with us until such a time as a family member can travel to California to collect him, as we are unable to escort him home at this time.

Please let me know how we can be of further assistance.

Respectfully

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Taylor

She laid the letter aside and rested her elbows on the mahogany desk, using her hands to cup her chin. Looking around the office, she felt a heaviness in her chest. What should have been a place to escape everything, was now a stark reminder of all she'd lost.

The office with its embossed wallpaper, musty books and oversized dark wood furniture was her father's favorite room. The room wasn't large, but it was cozy.

Two walls were decorated with a garish red and gold wallpaper. Needlepoint flowers hung on the walls, displayed beneath curved glass. The third wall had floor to ceiling wooden bookshelves lined

with the classics, military books, and her father's well-worn Bible. Her eyes stopped on her father's saber. He carried it during the war between the states and when he retired, it rested on one of the shelves. The final wall had a large picture window and Cassidy could see the rain hitting the glass.

Even the weather was sympathetic to her current mood.

She leaned back in his chair, inhaling the faint scent of cherry tobacco mingled with leather soap. She closed her eyes and imagined sitting on the settee as her father smoked his pipe in the evenings. Mama would serve cake and coffee and Briley would read from the large Bible with its tissue pages. It was then he decided he wanted to be in Chaplain Corps.

Squeezing her eyes so the tears wouldn't fall, she turned her attention back to the letter.

Darn the Army!

It hadn't been enough to lose her father and mother. Now she was in danger of losing Briley. *Why had he joined the military?* Cassidy and her mother tried to talk him out of it, but he was insistent on following in their father's footsteps. Of course, he wanted to go as far away from home as possible and ended up in San Francisco.

Cassie sighed. If Briley was ill, at least he was ill in a warmer climate.

She picked up the letter and scanned it once more.

She wondered why the Chaplain didn't mention what was wrong with Briley. She prayed it wasn't the smallpox. There had been an outbreak of the deadly virus and there was no known cure. She didn't know how she would bear it if Briley died.

"Are you all right, child?" a soft voice filled the air.

Cassidy's eyes focused on Errietta in the doorway. She moved the letter aside and stood. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired is all. Is dinner ready then?"

Errietta's shoulders straightened, and a memory flashed in Cassidy's mind of when she had first lied to their housekeeper years ago. She was about to get an earful, and she knew it.

"Is that all?" Errietta lifted her eyebrow and pursed her lips as she looked at the papers scattered on the desk. "Dinner can wait. You'll be gettin' none until you tell me what turned you inside out today." Errietta's lips pursed, eyes narrowing in a warning for Cassidy to choose her response carefully.

Letting loose a loud sigh, Cassidy sat back down in the plush leather seat.

"I'm tired, Errietta. I'm tired of people apologizing for my loss. I'm

trying to decode this paperwork that Father left before he died. I'm tired of the looks of pity and the gossip, and right now, I'm tired of the Army!" Cassidy turned back to the letters and bills. "I was just going through the letters on the desk." She lifted the letter in a fussy motion. "I found this from the Chaplain at the Presidio. It was mixed in with the mail. It must have arrived just as Mama passed and I didn't see it until today."

"What does it say?"

Cassidy handed the letter to Errietta. "It appears something has happened to Briley. They are requesting someone go fetch him in California! It must be me. He's the only family I have left, so of course, it will be me. Who else is left to go?"

Cassidy watched as Errietta's eyes scanned the paper. "The Presidio. That's all the way across the country."

"The Presidio? Why would the...," Errietta shook her head and handed the letter back to Cassidy. "George can go. I'm sure he will."

"No," Cassidy insisted. "The Chaplain said someone from the family must go." She saw hurt flutter across Errietta's face. "Not that you and George aren't family, but something's wrong, and they need to have a blood relative go. They won't allow him to travel alone." The letter slipped from Cassidy's hands as she bowed her head. She felt Errietta's hand on her shoulder.

"Now, now," the older woman said. "We will sort this out. First let's get you some dinner and an early night in your bed. My George and I will talk about this tonight and see where we can assist you. Remember now, everything happens in the *Good Lord's* time, not ours."

As Cassidy stood up from her father's desk, she remembered the picture that she had found earlier in the day. Grabbing a hold of the frame she carried it with her to the doorway where Errietta was still standing.

"Is this George?" Cassidy asked, showing her the picture of a wedding party in black and white.

"Yes, that is George there," Errietta's finger traced his face gently before moving to the next, "And your parents, this was their wedding day. It was such a pretty day."

"But where are you?" Cassidy asked biting her bottom lip.

"I wasn't in these photos, though there might be one from the reception with George and I dancing. But I oversaw making sure no one stepped on your mother's dress and that everything went as close to right as possible. Come, let's eat before it gets cold." Errietta finished wiping off the photo and carried it into the hall before setting

it on the table outside of the office.



CHAPTER TWO



Two weeks later

Devlin Kingston looked up from the papers he had been studying for the past hour. There was a map, a note from the Reverend, and a list of items he needed to purchase before he left for California.

Reverend Martin had left a note under his door asking Devlin to visit the Chapel before retiring for the night. He wondered what the Reverend needed. Tucking the note and the list in his pocket, he opened the map, placing it beside him on the bench.

With ordination just a few days away, he felt ill prepared to be setting off to support a parish, let alone one as large as the Presidio in California. He would be a Captain in the U.S. Army once he graduated from seminary. The Army Chaplain Corps didn't lead soldiers, but instead they met the spiritual needs of soldiers and their families. They could be placed in battles and war zones, but they weren't fighter, and had no command responsibilities.

He knew that God had a plan in all of this, but recently he had been finding himself to be rather small in the scheme of things. Going to California was not where he planned on settling, but if that is where he was called, then that is where he would go.

He sat underneath the shade of a huge oak tree in the seminary courtyard, surrounded by the large brick buildings and a chapel that made up the campus. Stone walkways lined the outside of the courtyard, and the grass was studded with trees of varying sizes.

The trees provide some shade from the harsh sun, but now the temperature was dropping as the yellow ball started to sink in the sky. He could feel the coolness of the concrete through his woolen pants. He would need to go inside soon, but the courtyard was one of his favorite places to read, pray and plan. Today he was planning.

It was hard to believe that his time was almost over at McCormick Theological Seminary. He had spent nearly three years preparing for God's calling. In a few short weeks he would be headed westbound for adventures unknown.

The prospect both thrilled and terrified him.

"Devlin!" He looked up to see who called his name. His friend,

Andrew Evans was walking on the pathway coming from the dormitory. Devlin raised his hand in greeting. "We only have two weeks left before graduation. Come out with us tonight."

Devlin just shook his head. He didn't want to be out in the city, not at night. There were too many distractions, or rather temptations and he didn't want to be the *chaperone* to his friends again either. He snapped the paper in his hand and folded it, tracing his finger along the lines marked on the thick paper. "Not tonight," he responded.

He heard Andrew's footsteps approaching and looked up as his friend sat down on a second concrete bench perched under the tree.

"You know, those maps aren't going to keep you company on your long trip out west," Andrew teased. "And it isn't like you can follow them when you are on the train."

Devlin folded up the map and tucked it under his leg. "No," he concurred, "but these maps are going to tell me where I'm going. Can you believe that they say the transcontinental railroad will only take eighty-three hours to cross the whole country when it's finished?" Devlin looked up at his friend with wide eyes. He had never traveled anywhere that fast in his life.

"I believe that staring at those maps while we only have a few more days to celebrate our lives and our freedom is going to lead you into a very sad and lonely adventure, my friend."

"You ready, Andrew?" A man approached the pair. "You coming tonight, Devlin?"

Devlin recognized Thomas Masters, another student. "Not tonight."

"He's reading his maps," Andrew said, standing. Thomas lifted his eyebrow but didn't say a word. Patting Devlin's shoulder, Andrew started to walk down the path. He turned around and walked backwards as he called to Devlin. "We'll be at the park if you decide you want to come out."

"Thanks. I'll remember that. Try to stay out of trouble tonight. And for goodness' sake avoid Miss Clarkson, it's not like you're going to marry her, and her father is the sheriff," Devlin admonished.

Andrew's laugh carried across the cool air. "Miss Clarkson would make an excellent minister's wife, just not mine!" Andrew grinned before turning around and jogging to catch up with his companion.

He pulled the map out once more and returned to his study of how all the railway lines connected. He would be going first to Omaha, then Denver... his finger traced the line marked with hatches which represented the train line. There would be a stop in Nevada and then on to San Francisco and The Presidio, where he would assist the Chaplain there and receive more training.

The sound of the spring peepers started to fill the air, announcing it was nearly time for bed. The birds started to rustle in the leaves and a pinkish hue filled the sky. Devlin loved this time of day. He knew the others thought he was silly to be so focused on his future, but he couldn't fight knowing that something of great importance was going to happen soon. He needed to be ready.

He spied the groundskeeper walking from lamp post to lamp post, lighting the oil lamps that kept the campus illuminated. Apart from the sound of the frogs and the chirping of the bird catching the flies swarming to the light, the silence in the courtyard was a blessing.

He held the map tightly in his hands as he bowed his head and whispered his evening prayer. He thanked the Lord for his goodness and prayed a blessing over the people at the seminary. He asked for understanding and wisdom. Finally, he asked the question that was on his mind all evening.

"Lord, I know you have plans for me and I'm humbled that you've chosen me at all. But I cannot do this alone, I don't feel like I'm ready."

But you're not alone.

The voice sounded audible. As if God himself was sitting next to him.

"Please give me a sign, Lord," he asked.

You will know.

"Thank you." Devlin caught himself responding aloud, but the response had been so clear and audible that he couldn't help but to answer in kind.

It was this quiet voice that brought him to seminary in the first place. He had been convinced that no one could possibly have the same experience that he did when speaking with God. He wanted to share everything the Lord had shown him to the people that needed it. His mother had thought him slightly mental when he mentioned hearing the audible voice, but the family pastor disagreed.

At eighteen years old, Devlin was the first from his family to chase a life outside of the one he knew. He wanted to get away from the town where he was raised with his brother and sisters. His father owned one of the largest coal mining companies along the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania.

Devlin wanted out.

He hated the scent of coal that would permeate his skin and clothes. Everything was covered in soot, and he had no desire to go underground. He couldn't escape the idea that he had a purpose and was being called to support those in need.

That was his mission. He was called to show God's love, as Christ had done and minister to the tired, injured, and widowed. He would build his congregation and tend to the flock until the time came to go home.

Somewhere in there he would find a wife, a helpmate, and settle down. He longed for a family of his own. Andrew was right. There were plenty of women that would make good wives. Just not a good wife for him. He didn't want one of the women that came visiting, hoping to catch a military husband.

Andrew called them *the boot chasers*.

With a heavy sigh, he slowly began gently folding up the maps that he had been studying. It was an old argument he had with himself and his parents. They wanted him to marry one of the other miner's daughters. It would be a good match, his mother said. He didn't care that it was more money and prestige for his family.

He wanted something more.

Devlin didn't want an arranged marriage, he wanted one ordained in love and God's blessing. Tucking the folded maps back into his notebook, he secured it with the cotton string he had in his pocket.

He heard the clock chime, announcing that the library was soon to close.

Picking up his notebook, he headed for the chapel, where Reverend Martin was waiting to speak with him.

It was a short walk down the cobblestone path to the oratory. The chapel building was made of bricks with a low porch and two steps. A heavy doorway hid underneath a large arch, with rich glass windows on either side.

Devlin could see the light coming through the colored glass. He stepped on the porch and pushed the oak door open into the small atrium.

The church was dim as services were over for the day. There were several candles lighting the entrance into the nave. He peeked in the large room, which was surrounded by dark wooden pews on each side of the aisle.

Reverend Martin wasn't at the bema, where Devlin expected to see him. He heard movement from behind a door off to the side of the narthex.

Devlin knocked on the door and peeked inside the vestry. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Come in. Come in," Reverend Martin said, ushering Devlin into the small room. The reverend draped his robe on a wooden and wire hanger and then placed it in a small wardrobe. Devlin stood at the

back of the room and looked around. There was a desk where the chaplain conducted church business. The desk was surrounded by wooden chairs of varying sizes. "Have a seat, Mr. Kingston. This should only take a moment."

Devlin sat on one of the chairs near the desk. It was the only one with a cushion, so he knew it would be more comfortable than the others. "What is this about?" Devlin was worried that something had happened to his assignment.

"I understand that you are leaving for the Presidio next week, is that correct?" Reverend Martin asked, sliding into the chair behind his desk.

Devlin clasped his hands. "I am actually leaving in a fortnight, sir. Right after graduation. Is there something I can help you with while I am here?"

He wasn't sure what the Reverend could possibly need. Normally he would feel his anxiety rise surrounding a change of plans, but he was struck that he didn't feel anything but peace at this moment. In his gut he knew he was supposed to be having this conversation, and it would change his world. But how could that be since the Reverend hadn't voiced his request?

"I received a letter from Chaplain Taylor at the Presidio." The reverend shuffled the papers on his desk. "Here it is," he said, pulling a folded piece of paper. "He writes: one of my parishioners, Briley Blackwood, is currently in a state of delirium. Chaplain Taylor has sent a letter to the family, requesting someone be sent to bring him home. A family member." The Reverend paused, removing his glasses for a moment. "Unfortunately, the only living relative is his sister, Cassidy. I attended the burial of her mother less than a month ago."

Both men's eyes closed, and a silent prayer was sent up for those left behind. It did not get easier helping others to understand that they could celebrate life, while mourning their losses. Regardless of the relationship each had with the Lord, loss was still painful and disorienting.

"What do you need me to do?" Devlin asked, a warmth in his spirit telling him that this was the right response.

The reverend gave a little chuckle and put the letter back on his desk. "Cassidy Blackwood is what you would call... *spirited*. I've known her since she was a child. In fact, I served with her father for a bit. What I know about Cassidy, is that she will want... *she will* go herself. The letter requested a family member, and she will not allow anyone else to go. Not even her father's man, George. She will insist on going herself and she will not be denied." The reverend smacked his hand against the desk, causing Devlin to jump. "You, my boy, shall

escort her to the Presidio.”

“Me?”

The reverend nodded. “I wouldn’t recommend anyone else. It makes sense for you to be her escort. You are both headed to the same place, and I am aware of your upstanding character.”

Devlin felt his lips curve into a smile. Upstanding character was something he had heard since childhood. He’d been able to avoid bad situations by listening to his gut. “And by spirited you mean...?” His head tilted to the side, waiting.

“Spirited. I’m not all that sure demure is in her vocabulary, though I am certain it is something everyone attempted to teach her. She will not hold her tongue and advising her of a woman’s role will simply leave you with a ringing in your ears.”

“She would strike me?” Devlin could not imagine that, though he did have sisters of his own... they would not have ever hit someone other than him, and not since entering polite society.

“Not at all. But she has a way with words, that once she starts talking... well, you’ll figure out what I mean rather quickly. I’d like to introduce you and then you’ll see for yourself what I mean. Would that be all right? I would not ask a commitment from you without giving you as many details as possible.” The reverend met his gaze and quieted.

“I- Yes, an introduction sounds appropriate, though I am unclear how you intend to have her escorted back. I am to remain at the Presidio until further orders are given.”

“You are quick, my friend. Let me speak with George and we will arrange a meeting. I am less concerned about her return; Taylor will not let her travel even with Briley if he is not able to defend himself. Shall we plan to meet after evening service tomorrow to discuss details further?”

Devlin nodded and stood. “That sounds fine, sir. I will speak with you after services tomorrow.” Devlin shook the elderly man’s hand and headed for the door.

As he placed his hand on the door handle, it dawned on him that the Reverend had not mentioned how old Miss Blackwood was. *Surely, he was not trying to settle him with a child for a journey across the country!*

“Mr. Kingston?”

Devlin kept his hand on the door handle and turned to face the Reverend. “Yes, sir?”

“One more thing. Miss Blackwood despises everything related to the military.”



CHAPTER THREE



Cassidy sipped her coffee as she skimmed the afternoon paper. The words floated in front of her, and she didn't spy anything of interest. It was hard to concentrate when all she could focus on was the words from her father's journal.

If anything happens, see Mr. Cunningham at the bank.

She had been saying the words over and over in her mind, like a puzzle that needed to be solved. What did Father mean? She had yet to see Mr. Cunningham and knew that a meeting was needed before she headed to California.

She didn't recall Mama going to the bank as Father handled all the financial affairs. That is probably why his papers were in such disarray. Cassidy hadn't decided yet if asking the banker to come to the house would be rude.

She heard Errietta's footsteps coming towards the study.

"I should have known you were here," she gently scolded.

"I still have quite a bit to go through. I don't know how Father kept his affairs in order. I can barely find anything."

"Maybe you should take a break for a little bit? We have company."

"Company?"

"The Reverend is here, with a guest," Errietta said, pulling Cassidy's focus away from the newspaper.

"The Reverend? Is there bad news?" She knew George had spoken to the reverend shortly after Mama's funeral. George never did tell Cassidy what it was about, other than the clergyman sending a letter to check on Briley.

"Not at all dear, George invited him for dinner tonight. It seems we may have a solution to at least one of your problems." Errietta smiled and waited.

Placing her cup on the small side table, Cassidy stood and dusted off her skirt. She followed Errietta into the foyer where the reverend was talking to George. Next to the reverend was a man that Cassidy didn't recognize.

Clearly, he is military, she thought as his eyes snapped up, landing on her before she had even fully taken in the scene. Not to be

deterred, she continued to peruse him.

He was tall. Much taller than any man she had ever seen. He had to be at least a foot taller than her five feet and two inches, and he stood head and shoulders above the other men in the room.

He was clean shaven with bright green eyes, and well-kept dark hair. He was very young looking, and Cassidy took a guess that he was maybe two, but no more than three years older than she was.

He wore a single-breasted black wool frock with flat brass buttons. A black velvet epaulette adorned each shoulder with shepherd's crook embroidered in silver thread decorating the center. Silver crosses decorated his collar. She could see the edge of a cream linen shirt peek from beneath the fabric. His black wool pants had a sharp crease in the front and leather boots, so shiny they reflected the light, covered his feet.

Why was he here?

She nearly forgot herself when the man reached out and tapped the Reverend on his arm, then pointed towards Cassidy.

Reverend Martin walked over and clasped Cassidy's hands in his own. His crepe skin felt cool from the night air. "Ah, Cassidy, how are you faring my child?" he asked patting the back of her hand.

Cassidy gave a half curtsy. "I am as well as can be expected in these troubling times, Reverend. And how are you?" She smiled, her eyes darting to the stranger and back to the minister.

"I am faring well enough, child. Every day is a blessing." The Reverend turned to his companion. "Allow me to introduce Mr. Devlin Kingston. Mr. Kingston, this is Miss Cassidy Blackwood. Cassidy, young Kingston is one of the new clergymen I have been sponsoring this year."

"Miss Blackwood," he greeted her with a curt bow. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I've heard quite a bit about your family in the last few months. I am sorry for the loss of your mother."

"Thank you," she whispered, looking away. After a moment she looked back at the young cleric. "I noticed the reverend called you Mr. Kingston. You are wearing an Army uniform; don't you have a rank?"

The man smiled; the corner of his lips raised in amusement. "No ma'am. Not yet. I'm not formally commissioned until next week."

"Well then there is still time."

"Time?" Devlin asked.

Cassidy blinked her eyes several times. "Why, time so you don't have to enlist in the military."

Devlin chuckled. "I'm not enlisting. I'm appointed. There is a

difference.”

Cassidy narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth. Before a word could come out, George stepped forward and pushed Errietta between Cassidy and Devlin.

“You’ll have to excuse Cassidy,” George said. “She hasn’t been sleeping well and thus may speak out of turn.” He grabbed Errietta’s hand, pulling her close to him. “This is my wife, Errietta, Mr. Kingston.”

“No offense has been taken. Mrs. Schank, it is lovely to see you again. Thank you for the invitation to dinner.”

“Of course, let us gather in the dining room,” Errietta said, turning to pat Cassidy on the arm with a warning look, before walking out of the room with a spring in her step.

Cassidy watched Errietta’s back as she practically floated towards the dining room. Turning to Devlin she saw him signal with his hand in the direction Errietta departed.

“After you, Miss Blackwood.”

Cassidy looked at Errietta once more. She was conversing with the reverend in hushed tones.

That could only mean one thing.

Something was afoot, and Cassidy knew she wouldn’t like it.



Devlin watched as Cassidy shook her head as if to clear it before she noticed that he was patiently waiting with an arm extended to escort her to dinner.

“You do realize your elbow is nearly level with my head, don’t you?” she asked, pivoting towards the dining room.

“I do. Which is why I was offering my forearm,” Devlin responded, tucking both arms behind his back.

“You are very tall.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“I don’t like people towering over me.”

Devlin could see her standing as tall as she could and putting her shoulders back. It didn’t do anything for her height. She was still a little thing and would fit perfectly in his arms. Except that her head was nearly level with his elbow. Her blue eyes flashed, and Devlin tried not to chuckle.

Clearly, she has already decided we are not going to be friends, he

thought, eyeing the loose brownish-red curls bouncing around her cheeks as she shook her head.

“It wasn’t my intention.”

“*Hmmm*,” she pondered. “Is there a chance that you are a priest?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“Nay, I am Presbyterian. There will be no vow of celibacy from me.” He couldn’t help but poke at her to see what would come next. The Reverend had mentioned she was spirited, and he could see that anyone would have their hands full with her.

She was a very handsome woman. Her skin was the color of the finest China, with cheeks the color of summer peaches. Her full lips reminded Devlin of the wild raspberries he and his brother would collect along the banks of the river.

She wore a blue chintz dress that made her eyes appear brighter. The top hugged her tightly, emphasizing her small waist and the skirt flared to the floor. If he wanted to, he could pick her up and put her in his pocket, she was that slight.

She entered the dining room area, stopping at the door. George was assisting his wife into her seat. The Reverend stood behind one of the chairs, waiting for Cassidy to take her place at the table.

“You’ll not find a wife here,” she said through clenched teeth. She kept her eyes on the table, not even glancing back as she educated him on her thoughts.

“Who’s finding a wife?” Errietta asked, eyeing them as they settled into seats at the table.

“I fear the Reverend has misled Mr. Kingston, and he may be after a wife, which again, he will not find here.” Cassidy explained, leveling a stare at the good reverend that Devlin found amusing.

“That is not what I said, lass. You assumed I was here for a wife, after asking whether or not I may be a priest.” He grinned broadly at her, satisfied that he was now bearing the weight of her narrowed gaze.

Reverend Martin chuckled, “Well, I’m so glad to see that everyone is minding their manners.”

“My apologies, I am not myself as of late and I am still not looking for a husband.” Cassidy dropped her head to stare at her plate for a moment. “How can I help you gentlemen?”

The conversation paused as the final bowls were placed on the table, and heads bowed, thanking the Lord for his care and provision. Cassidy added a silent plea for patience before looking back up.

Reverend Martin lifted his napkin and placed it across his lap. “I received a letter from the chaplain where Briley is stationed. It is my

understanding that Briley has found himself rather ill and a request was made to bring him home. I know you well enough to know that you intend to go yourself. So, the question is, how can we help you?"

Devlin watched as the energy seemed to leave the sprite. He couldn't think of a better term for the small fiery headed creature in front of him.

"What do you know about Osiris Cunningham?" Her gaze landed on George and the Reverend, ignoring Devlin completely, which allowed him to eat and watch the scene play out.

"The banker?" Errietta looked up sharply. Cassidy nodded her head.

"Osiris Cunningham served with your father in the Battle of Appomattox before returning home to take over the bank when his Father passed away." Reverend Martin spoke confidently.

"I think he may have designs on our young Cassidy here," George answered, eyeing her. "He's a widower and in need of a wife." Devlin watched a shudder run over Cassidy's petite frame.

"He's too old for me. I have business with him. I do not intend to marry anyone." She blew on a spoonful of soup before gingerly tasting it.

"You may change your mind," Errietta said softly.

Cassidy looked up. Her eyes fell on Devlin, and he saw her squint. "That's why he's here. You want to marry me off to Mr.... Kingston, was it?" Cassidy stabbed her spoon in the air. "I said he would find no wife here."

"Cassidy Finely Maire! That's enough. Your dear mother would turn over in her grave to hear you speak like that." Errietta's sharp rebuke had everyone sitting up straighter. Devlin saw the opening though and took it.

"Miss Errietta, I'm afraid it's my fault. I was poking at her." He gave her an apologetic nod before continuing. "Miss Blackwood, I understand from the reverend that you are needed out west. I am leaving in a week for the Presidio. Reverend Martin has asked if I would like a traveling companion, and suggested I escort you to your brother." He leaned over and whispered loud enough for everyone to hear. "I think he's loath to see what mischief I will cause if bored."

Cassidy looked from Reverend Martin to George, pausing on Errietta before meeting Devlin's gaze. "I have to go to California to collect my brother. I do not intend to marry you, I can take care of myself and I do not like whistlers. Hum if you must but do not whistle."

Devlin cleared his throat. "I am not currently after a wife. I do not

like rudeness. I will not negotiate with you about your safety. And I don't whistle." Devlin smoothed his napkin on the table, his eyes never leaving hers.

"It reminds me too much of my Father. The hurt is too great to bear right now." She sat a little taller. "I am not a child. All the military has done is get my family killed. I will not blindly obey your orders whether for my safety or something else."

"I am a man of God first and foremost, a military man second and a gentleman." He paused. "How can I be of service?"

"You can get me to California without incident, and you cannot fall in love with me."

Devlin snorted. "That will be easy enough."

He saw Errietta lean over toward her husband. "Well, that went better than expected," she said.

Better than what? he thought.



CHAPTER FOUR



The following morning Cassidy didn't need to head to the bank as Mr. Cunningham came calling around ten o'clock.

Cassidy was sitting on the floor of the study with several stacks of paper around her when there was a loud knock on the door. She heard George greet the visitor and the sound of voices speaking in low tones reached her ears. She didn't look up from her papers as footsteps approached the study. So far, it had been just over three weeks and Cassidy was still sorting through her family's affairs. Why hadn't she started after Father passed?

She didn't want to believe it was true. If she didn't come in the study, she didn't have to think about her beloved parents being buried in the ground. Now she spent as much time as possible in there to be closer to them.

"I think all of this can go in the rubbish," she told George. A pair of scuffed congress shoes appeared in her vision, and she looked up to find the banker standing over her. He held a large leather satchel under his arm.

"Good morning, Miss Blackwood," Mr. Cunningham said. He was a round man with rosy cheeks and a silver beard and hair. There was a reason he played Father Christmas at her parents' holiday parties.

She smiled, recalling that Mr. Cunningham would hide mints and sugared candies in his pockets for the children. He would entertain the children for hours telling stories and pretend adventures of traveling around the world in a sleigh. Cassidy would hang on every word.

Those were magical times. Now, they would never happen again. She shook her head dismissing the memories.

Cassidy rolled back on her heels and stood, careful not to kick the papers she had just finished sorting. "Mr. Cunningham, it is a pleasure to see you," she said shaking the man's hand. "Thank you for stopping by."

"I'm sorry I wasn't available after the death of your poor mama. George left a message asking me to stop by when I returned to town. How may I be of service?"

"Please, have a seat," Cassidy directed him to the sofa. "May I offer you a cup of coffee?"

“That would be just dandy, Miss Blackwood. Thank you.”

Cassidy looked at George before he disappeared from the study. She returned to the desk and picked up the letter with the words that had been running through her mind.

“I found a letter from my father. It stated that if anything were to happen to him, we were to contact you immediately.” She moved to a chair opposite the settee from where Mr. Cunningham was sitting. “I don’t believe my mother knew about the letter or had time to visit you before she fell ill. I just learned about the letter recently.”

“And what of your brother?” Mr. Cunningham asked quietly, “Usually it is the son who handles the affairs of his parents.”

“Unfortunately, I am left to do these things. My older brother, Briley is currently at the Presidio in California under medical care. There is no one else to speak for my family.”

“Ahh, I see. I’m sorry to hear that.” He leaned forward, removing his glasses, and looking at her thoughtfully.

Errietta came in with a silver coffee pot and china cups. It panged Cassidy’s heart to see them being used. “I placed some cookies on a plate.” She put the tray on the table between them and then touched Cassidy’s shoulder. “Do you need us to stay?”

Cassidy shook her head. This was something she needed to do alone. Once Errietta left, Cassidy poured the coffee and handed a cup to her visitor. The elegant cup looked out of place in his large hands. He took a sip of coffee, then placed his cup on the table. “May I?” he asked, pointing to the letter in Cassidy’s lap.

“Of course.” She handed him the letter and she watched him scan the words on the page.

“Did he ever tell you how we met?”

“No. He didn’t. I’m thinking it was the war since that was something he never talked about,” she said sipping her coffee.

“Your father and I were cadets together and went through all the ranks together. He was promoted to General and was leading troops into battle during the Civil War. He saved my life when I was injured at the battle of Appomattox Courthouse. I owe him my life. And my leg.”

“Your leg?”

“I took a lead ball in my calf and your father refused to allow the surgeon to remove it. He took care of me himself and once I was recovered enough, he made sure I was able to return home. I took over the bank from my father. Robbie came to see me about his concerns for the future.”

Robbie? Cassidy gave a little giggle. She was sure she had never

heard her father being called a diminutive form of his name.

Mr. Cunningham wiped his glasses on the edge of a napkin and placed them back on his face. He picked up the leather satchel and flipped it open. Pulling out some papers he handed them to Cassidy.

She glanced at the papers but couldn't decipher the legal language. "I don't understand what I'm looking at," she finally said, with a slight sigh. She handed the papers back to the banker then rubbed her temples. A headache was starting to form. *Maybe she needed a nap.*

He pulled out a paper that was folded thrice and opened it, laying it flat on his knees. "This is your father's legacy. It is his last will and testament. It was made shortly before he passed. I need to go over it with you. There are also provisions for Errietta and George, so they should be present."

Cassidy nodded and went to the door to call for them. It only took a moment for them to enter the room and sit down.

"What's this all about?" George asked.

"I need everyone to hear what is being said."

Before they could continue there was another knock on the door. Cassidy silently groaned.

"Give me a moment, please," Errietta said as she went to open the door. She returned a moment later with Mr. Kingston.

He wasn't in his clergy frock, instead he was in a plain linen shirt with dark pants. His hair was combed back, and he looked at Cassidy with a twinkle in his eye. Spying Mr. Cunningham, his smile disappeared, and he looked at George. "I pray I'm not interrupting anything."

"We just had some business to attend to, but you are more than welcome to wait. Errietta can get you a cup of coffee, if you can just let us finish this."

"Of course."

"Mr. Kingston," Mr. Cunningham called. "It is fortuitous that you stopped by."

Devlin raised his eyebrow. "Really?"

The banker nodded. "I need a witness for the reading of the will. Since you are a clergyman, you would be an ideal witness."

Devlin raised his hands, "I don't know..."

"Otherwise, everyone will need to come back to my office and go through the reading once more. I just came as a preliminary courtesy."

Cassidy rubbed her temple once more. "Please, Mr. Kingston, I'd like to you stay. You might then be able to more accurately convey things to Briley when we arrive in San Francisco." Honestly, it was

because she didn't want to go into town to the bank to take care of business.

He looked at her once more, staring with such an intense gaze that she felt it all the way to her toes. She turned her head away from him. There was something in his eyes that called for her to bare her soul, and that just wouldn't do. She had a household to run, a brother to retrieve, and a million papers to continue going through. She looked at the others in the room and couldn't remember the last time she had felt this small.

Errietta returned with a cup and poured Devlin some coffee from the silver coffeepot. There wasn't anywhere for him to sit, so he leaned against the corner of the desk. Cassidy glanced at him once more before turning her attention back to Mr. Cunningham.

"Shall we begin?" he asked. Cassidy nodded and his voice filled the room. "The Last Will and Testament of General Robert Christopher Michael Blackwood III..."

She listened to the words but couldn't make sense of them. Her ears perked up when she heard about the home and belongings. She couldn't believe it! Looking at the banker she felt her cheeks flush. She had just lost her home. The only thing left. *Why not take everything from her?* Embarrassment filled her as she knew Devlin was watching her complete humiliation.

"I need to understand this." She tried to keep the bitterness out of her tone, but it was difficult. "My Father left our family home to George and Errietta unless Briley decides to make it his home?"

Why had Father done this? She knew he loved her, but the idea that he assumed she would not want the family home, hurt her deeply. Just because it wasn't the norm in society, it still hurt that she hadn't been considered.

"That is correct. I would say he anticipated you being married and setting up a home of your own outside of the manor."

"But this is my home. I don't want to move." She glared at George as if he had something to do with this change of plans.

"The house is still yours, Cassidy. And Briley's. We are just being allowed to live here the rest of our days." Lowering her head, Cassidy apologized for her tone and waited for George to continue. "You'll move when you're ready to. Just as your father told me when I first moved into Blackwood Manor, you'll always have a home." George reached out to hold her hand, and Cassidy felt something settle inside of her. She was still angry, but she grasped George's hand and gave it a squeeze.

An hour later, documents had been signed, witnessed by Devlin.

Cassidy was glad that he was there, as it forced her not to throw a scene when she heard the stipulations of the will.

Papa had planned for Briley to establish residence at the house, but Briley wasn't here. Funds had been set up for her and her brother. It was more money than she had ever thought about. But money wouldn't bring her parents back, nor give her the home that she adored. She instructed Mr. Cunningham to donate a portion of the funds to the local women's foundation which helped widows and orphans of war to survive.

There was an interesting clause, Cassidy noted. The will stipulated that any spouse would not receive access to her accounts. She knew plenty of women that gladly turned over their independence when they married. She was pleased Father had at least thought that part through. Men tended to flock to young women with large fortunes. And those fortunes were then handed over to their new husbands. The young wives had to ask for permission to do things including buying food. Cassidy didn't want to live that life.

She looked at Devlin and wondered if he would be the same. She needed to dismiss such thoughts from her mind.

"I'll stop by tomorrow to pick up the letter of account and my traveling funds," she told the banker as he departed. She knew exactly why her father entrusted the man to keep his personal affairs in order. Mr. Cunningham was organized, discreet and honorable. With a wave, Mr. Cunningham was headed down the street. She closed the door and turned to face Devlin. "Thank you for being here. That made it much simpler."

"I'm glad I could be of service."

He was extremely handsome out of his clergy uniform. There was something more relaxed about him – less formal. Looking at him she felt her palms begin to perspire. Wiping them on her skirt, she hurriedly went back to her father's study where she felt safe. Correction... *George's study now.*

She needed some time alone. George and Errietta were nowhere to be seen when she went back in the room. She felt Devlin follow her. Stopping short, he nearly ran into her, placing his hands on her shoulders to steady himself.

Cassidy felt her breath quicken as heat radiated through her from the simple touch. She closed her eyes, relishing in the contact. But it wouldn't do. He was her chaperone. Nothing else. His job was simply to get her to California.

She needed to get rid of him. Force him to leave. Then she'd be able to cry in peace. Opening her eyes, she turned, shrugging his hands from her shoulders. Narrowing her eyes, she growled. "Why are

you here?”



CHAPTER FIVE



It was done. Devlin was officially ordained, graduating with top honors in his class.

The ceremony was small, but he was sure that he saw Cassidy sitting in the back of the chapel as he walked up to claim his vestments after his name was called. When he turned back around his eyes scanned the pews, he didn't see anything but the door to the nave closing.

His classmates had gone to celebrate, but he found himself sitting in the back of the chapel, where he thought he had seen Cassidy. He fingered his new robes with a bit of awe that he was truly a Chaplain. He couldn't wait to get to San Francisco and meet the congregation there.

His mind drifted back to the lady who had been occupying his thoughts over the past few days.

He felt empathy towards the young woman. She had lost both her parents and now, was in danger of losing the rest of her inheritance. Maybe when she returned with her brother everything would sort itself out.

He rubbed his heart, a slight ache beneath his breastbone caused him to pause. He sat with the feeling for a moment but could find no reason why he would suddenly feel melancholy.

"So, Lord, what am I supposed to do with the feisty young lady?" he asked aloud.

"Well, I would say getting her to California would probably be a good start," Reverend Martin said chuckling as he sat down on the pew beside him.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize anyone was still here."

"Someone is always here, son. Remember, you are never alone." The reverend pointed towards the ceiling. "Now, what is your concern about Miss Blackwood?"

Devlin wasn't sure how much of his counsel to share. "When we get to the Presidio I will have to report to my post. I won't be with her as easily as I will be during the trip."

"She will be making arrangements to bring her brother home." The reverend looked at Devlin with wise eyes. "But I don't think that is

what is really bothering you.”

“I’d hate for something to happen to her.” There were other feelings swirling inside him, but he wasn’t prepared to speak them into existence just yet.

“Once you arrive, you’ll report to Chaplain Taylor. He is who Cassidy needs to see, as well. I’m sure if she feels uncertain, or has concerns, that he will allow you to continue to provide counsel. It may be what some refer to as a working assessment as well.”

Something stirred in Devlin. He knew that taking a wife now would be a silly commitment, especially one who outwardly despised the institution that he had sworn to uphold and honor. Traveling was going to be interesting, if nothing else. *Why would the thought of marriage even enter his mind?* He just needed to get to his assignment and escort Miss Blackwood. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“And if she grows too attached to me?” He said the words so softly he wasn’t sure if he said them aloud or not.

“Are you concerned for your virtue?” Reverend Martin turned his head, raising an eyebrow and watched Devlin’s face.

Devlin laughed. “No. I’m not worried for my virtue.”

“Hers perhaps?”

Devlin shook his head. “Not her virtue either.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know what I’m concerned with exactly. I am steadfast in my beliefs, resolve and focus. Nothing has been able to sway me. Yet, I feel that she is going to test each of those.” Devlin’s grimace was more telling than he would have liked.

“Ah I see,” the reverend nodded his agreement. “Now that I’m sure both of your virtues are safe, why don’t you think of this adventure as something different. Maybe a friendship can be born. I think Cassidy needs a friend. Perhaps instead of allowing her to continue despising our institution, you’ll be able to help her understand why you choose to serve; or why her father did. If I could wish one thing for Cassidy, it would be that she makes her peace with the military. The service is not her enemy, nor are the men serving.” The older man stood and brushed off his pants, before offering one last piece of advice.

“Devlin, you have done things here at the academy that I have not seen another young chaplain successfully conquer. You are quiet, keep your own counsel and are of sound mind and spirit. If I had had any concerns about Miss Blackwood traveling with you, I would not have suggested it. Prayer is a powerful tool and discernment is something only the Holy Father can offer. Remember Romans 8:28 and do send me a note along your travels if you have any concerns or need for

counsel.”

Before Devlin could ask anything else the Reverend had disappeared out the side door, closing it with a loud echo that carried through the nave.

Romans.

That was Paul's letter, he thought. Rarely did verses come up in his life that he hadn't found a need to pray over and learn from. Gently setting his vestments aside, he picked up the worn King James family Bible beside him and began to read the chapter.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.- Romans 8:28

Over the next several hours Devlin found himself pondering the verse. He loved God with all his heart and had always felt that he was walking within the purpose God set before him. He never questioned it until now. He knew God was guiding his way and he just needed to be patient.

He thought of the family members he left behind. He couldn't explain the calling on his heart to them. He just knew he had to follow it. The only one that didn't question him was his twin brother, Declan.

How he missed his brother.

Hopefully, he would be able to see Declan more frequently once he was out west. Declan was a U.S. marshal in the southwestern states and territories. They hadn't seen each other in years but did correspond when possible.

I wonder what Declan would think of Cassidy, he thought.

Closing his Bible, he bowed his head in prayer. When he was done, he left the nave, blowing out the candles on his way out the door. He needed to finish packing and move on to the next phase of his life.



Cassidy wasn't sure how she was supposed to feel, looking up at the house that she had grown up in. She was standing next to the hackney George had hired to take them to the train station.

The man was already loading her small travel trunk on top of the coach. Her carpetbag sat by her feet. She didn't know how long she would be staying in California once she saw Briley.

She talked with Errietta and George, wondering if she would return home immediately or if she would have to stay for some undetermined length of time. They didn't even know if he was going to be able to travel at this point. Cassidy would assess the situation

when she got out there and send a letter home.

Errietta pushed a curl behind Cassidy's ear and tucked it underneath her bonnet. "I sent a note to my sister in Denver to let her know that you would be passing through," she said. "There's a women's boarding house on Broad Street. Next door is the men's boarding house. It would be a perfect spot to break up your journey. Perhaps you should stop for the night. I can let my sister know to greet you at the station."

"I don't know if I can make those decisions, won't it be up to Mr. Kingston?" Cassidy didn't want to argue. It was difficult to think straight when fatigue had been her constant companion. Perhaps she would sleep on the train.

"Escorts don't make those types of decisions, either," Errietta mused. "I'm sure that there is time to spare. It didn't sound like Mr. Kingston had plans to make this the fastest trip to the coast either."

"Mr. Kingston may have time, but Briley does not. I am sure that we will go directly to the Presidio and not stop off at any small towns," Cassidy snapped. A small frown appeared over Errietta's face. She quickly hid it, but not before Cassidy knew she had hurt the dear lady with her harsh words. "I'm sorry, Errietta. I don't know what is wrong with me."

"It's been a rough few months, child." She pulled Cassidy into a hug. "Let God lead you. Remember that showing up tired and sensitive at the base is not going to make you any friendlier when you get there." Errietta smiled knowingly at her. "A rest might be just what you need before you arrive."

It hadn't ever been a secret that when Cassidy was tired or hungry, she was likely to be more shrewish than ladylike.

"Yes, Errietta. I'll remember to sleep and think before I speak." Cassidy could feel the tips of her ears turning pink.

"Ladies, are we ready?" George asked walking through the front door and down the steps. "Here's the basket for the train."

Cassidy took the basket. It was filled with snacks for the trip and several jars of lemonade in, wrapped up in gingham fabric. "This is a lot of food," Cassidy said. "I can't eat all of it."

"It isn't just for you, my dear. She also made enough for Mr. Kingston."

"Oh." Cassidy felt foolish, thinking that the contents were just for her. That told her how off her thinking was.

"Yes, George we're ready," Errietta said fixing the stray curl one last time before she grabbed Cassidy's hand and led her to the coach.

Cassidy nodded but there wasn't much else to say at this point.

Things were moving fast, and she felt like someone was pushing her to just keep going forward.

“It’s going to be okay, little bit. That boy will keep watch over you while you travel. Just send a note when you hit each stop if there’s time. And one to let us know when you’re coming back,” George said leaning in to kiss her cheek.

“I’m going to miss you both,” Cassidy spoke quietly. She didn’t want to leave, but she knew she couldn’t stay. It wouldn’t take long to get to the train station, and she had her traveling papers tucked into her reticule, and coins sewn into the hem of her traveling coat.

She climbed into the coach and placed her carpetbag and basket on the seat next to her. George tapped the side of the coach and it lurched forward, slowly heading towards the train station.

Cassidy put her head outside the window.

Errietta waved her handkerchief and called out, “Don’t forget to eat! And check your journal, I left you something!” Cassidy lifted her hand.

She saw Errietta dab at her eyes with the linen handkerchief as George held his arm around her shoulders. Cassidy gave a little wave and wondered if this was the last time she would ever see them again.



CHAPTER SIX



Devlin looked around the train platform one more time before checking his watch. He picked up the tickets earlier that morning from Mr. Cunningham at the bank. The elderly gentleman insisted that Cassidy have a private compartment. It cost more than his yearly salary for the train ticket, but he wasn't the one paying for it.

The Army provided him a stipend for traveling but since getting a ticket wasn't necessary now, he could put the money aside towards the purchase of a home. He glanced at his watch once more. Cassidy was nowhere to be found.

Did she decide not to go and send someone else instead?

"All aboard!" the trainman called.

Devlin picked up his bag. "How much longer before the train pulls out?"

The trainman looked at his watch. "About ten minutes, but you need to be on board in five, when we close the doors."

Devlin thanked the man and moved back towards the platform. *Where was she?*

He hadn't seen Cassidy since the day he stopped by her house and became a witness to the reading of her father's will. She sat stoically through the notices and couldn't hide her disappointment at some of the assignments. She tried hard to contain her emotions, but he could tell she was upset as her voice became higher and she worried her hands in her lap.

After the banker left, she informed Devlin that she would travel with him and would meet him at the train station the morning they were to depart. He could tell that she was in distress, and he didn't want to leave her, but she insisted, complaining that she was tired and had a headache from the day's activity.

All week he thought about her glistening blue eyes. He had to admit that she was stronger than any woman he had ever met. He could tell she was on the verge of tears, but she hadn't shed one. He had never enjoyed watching a woman cry, but he knew it could be cathartic. Cassidy needed to cry and let out all the emotions bottled up inside her.

The thought of her being sad ripped his insides to shreds. He

wanted to do something to banish all sadness from her. But what? And now, listening to the trainman give the final boarding call, he wouldn't have that chance.

He played their conversations over in his mind, wondering if there might have been something he said to offend her. He would have expected George or at least Reverend Martin to let him know if plans had changed. Mr. Cunningham didn't even say a word when he picked up the tickets to indicate that Cassidy might not be coming.

Once Andrew found out that Devlin was escorting the young Miss Cassidy across half the nation, the teasing started. It was all in good humor and never malicious, but the young man knew exactly who Cassidy was.

"You should marry that girl before you get to San Francisco. She would make a perfect wife."

Devlin dismissed the thought. He knew nothing about her skills, or demeanor, other than she could get a bit snippety at times. Now he wondered if the teasing from Andrew was making him addlebrained.

He was already concerned that she wasn't coming, and he didn't know how he would bear it if he couldn't see her once more before heading to California.

"Are you boarding, sir?" the trainman asked. "We need to get everyone seated."

"Yes, I'm coming." He gave one final glance over his shoulder as he picked up his bag and headed towards the train.

"He's not going to be happy I was late. I pray we've not missed the train." A sharp female voice filled the air.

His face broke into a smile as Cassidy was nearly running towards him.

"Slow down, Miss!" the man behind her said. Devlin could see he was carrying a trunk. Cassidy had a carpetbag in one hand and a basket covered with a cloth on her arm.

"We need to wait a minute," Devlin said. "She's here."

"Hurry it up, then. I won't blow the whistle until she's on board."

"Thank you." Devlin handed the man his bag. "Can you hold that in the doorway so I can help her with her trunk?" The man nodded, and Devlin raced towards Cassidy.

She was trying to lift the edge of her skirt so she could move quicker. The basket was bumping against her side with each stride. The fabric swirled around tiny ankles and what looked like some type of riding boot.

Moving quickly, he made a grab for her just as the heel of her boot

caught on the hem of her dress, sending her hurtling towards the stone covered ground. Devlin planted his feet to keep them both from toppling and hoisted Cassidy up against his chest, her feet tapping against his shins as she flailed slightly.

"I've got you," he said, lowering her gently to the ground. The feel of her body pressed against him made him feel things he never had before. She was the perfect size to fit in his arms. When he placed her on the ground, she looked at him with large eyes the color of sapphires. Her cheeks were rosy from running and her breath was coming out in small pants.

"Thank you for catching me," she breathed, a hand coming to rest against her chest. The basket knocked against his side. "You can release me now," she mumbled into his shirt.

"My apologies, Miss Blackwood." Moving her back a bit, he paused a moment to make sure that she was balanced before removing his hands from her waist. The man carrying her trunk finally caught up. "I was afraid you weren't going to make it. Or that you changed your mind."

"The wheel on the carriage broke. I needed to wait while the driver fixed it. Thank goodness some men stopped to help. I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner."

"Final call for all those who need to board."

"Oh," Cassidy said, "we need to get on the train."

Devlin handed the man a coin. "I can carry her trunk. Thank you for getting her here."

Devlin took the trunk. When he turned, Cassidy was already climbing up the steps onto the train. The trainman handed her back the basket and beamed as she gave him a smile. The man was so enamored, Devlin had to clear his throat so the man would allow him to board the train.

"My apologies, sir," he said, moving to the side.

Devlin placed the trunk on the platform above the steps and climbed on board as the trainman blew his whistle to the engineer to signify that the train could leave the station. He picked up the trunk and tried to get his carpetbag with his fingers. He couldn't hold both.

"Miss Blackwood," he called. Cassidy had just entered the car, her basket bumping against the people sitting on the hard benches.

She turned, nearly knocking a poor woman in the head.

"Watch what ye be doin', missy," the woman said.

"My apologies, please." Cassidy moved back to the door where Devlin was struggling with the bags.

“Can you please carry my bag? I’ll manage the trunk.”

“Of course.” Cassidy took the bag from him. “I’m afraid I don’t know which way we are going.”

Devlin pointed toward the car with his chin. “We are near the caboose.”

“Caboose? What a funny word.” She repeated the word softly as a child would upon learning something new.

“The end. Head towards the end of the train. This trunk isn’t exactly light.”

“Oh!” Cassidy took a step back into the car when the train whistle blew, the screech filling the air. Black smoke started to drift down the side of the train and the engine lurched forward, rocking Devlin into the door frame. “Are you hurt?” Cassidy said, turning to make sure he was alright.

“I told ya to watch where you are swinging that thing,” the woman sitting on the bench growled. She held out her hand to steady the basket as Cassidy tried to maneuver herself in the small space.

“Again, my apologies.”

“Miss Blackwood, if you could keep walking, I’d like to be able to put this trunk down.”

Cassidy walked sideways down the aisle, turning the bags and basket so she wouldn’t hit anyone. Devlin couldn’t help but grin. Her hat was completely askew, and he could see her blow the hair in front of her face. She had a bit of dirt on her cheek, but her lips were the brightest pink as she chewed on them before blowing the hair from her face once more.

When they reached the end of the car, Cassidy looked at him. “Keep going?”

Devlin nodded. He was too out of breath to say anything. *What did she have in her trunk?* Whatever it was, he would arrange for one of the stewards to take it off the train. They crossed the platform to the next car. Devlin could see Cassidy hesitate a moment as the rails started to pass by underneath them.

“It’s alright. Just step over,” he encouraged her.

Cassidy took a giant step, way too large for the small gap, and nearly lost her balance as she reached the second door. Devlin tried to not look down as the train was gathering speed. He shifted the trunk to the side and closed his eyes as he took the step across the platforms connecting the two cars.

Cassidy was holding the door with her back. Devlin used his elbow to hold the door, which allowed Cassidy to enter the car. The car had a large aisle with doors on either side. These must be the private

compartments. A man in a red uniform with black brocade approached Cassidy and took one of the bags from her.

“Do you have a compartment down here?” he asked.

“I – I don’t know,” she stammered, turning to find Devlin.

“Three,” he said in a breathy whisper. His arms were killing him. The steward took the second bag from Cassidy and headed further into the train car. He opened a door and disappeared into the private compartment.

Cassidy followed him and Devlin brought up the rear. As he approached the door to the compartment the steward stepped back into the hallway.

“Do you need some help with that, sir?” he asked.

Devlin just shook his head. “Just hold the door.” The man held the pocket door in place as Devlin lugged the trunk into the compartment. He placed it on one of the benches and fell into the seat next to it.

The steward stood in the doorway. “My name is James. There is a bell here,” he demonstrated by pulling the string next to the door, “that calls me when you need something. Dinner service starts at four o’clock.”

“Oh, I have sandwiches, thank you,” Cassidy said.

“Dinner was included with your fare. The dining room is in the car behind this one.”

“The caboose?” Cassidy said.

James nodded. “Bed linens and towels are in this closet and this here, is your privy.” He knocked on a thin door right behind the linen closet. “The ticket man should be by shortly, so just have your tickets ready to show him.”

“I don’t have a ticket,” Cassidy said.

Devlin stood, holding his hand to his chest as he tried to catch his breath. “Yes, you do. I picked them up this morning.” He reached into the inside pocket of his frock and pulled out an envelope.

James looked relieved as he backed out of the car. “If you need anything, just ring.”

Devlin nodded and handed the envelope to Cassidy. “If you can hold those for a moment, I’ll try to get this trunk under the bench.”

“Doesn’t it go on top?” she asked, taking the envelope.

“There is no way I can lift that up to that rack. I’m not Samson.” With a tug the trunk dropped to the floor. “What do you have in here? A dead body?”

“Why Mr. Kingston, what a horrible thing to say. I’ll have you know I keep all my dead bodies in the pantry at home.” She gave a

laugh that filled the air with such a melody, Devlin forgot to breathe for moment.

"Then pray tell...", he asked, pushing the trunk under the bench, "what is in here?"

"Books." Cassidy looked rather proud of herself. She swayed where she was standing, the fabric from her skirt wrapping around her legs as she moved left then right.

"You mean to tell me this trunk is full of books?" Cassidy nodded. "What in Heaven's sake for?"

"I like to read. So does Briley. I don't know what type of library they have out there, so I brought books for me to read on the ride out there and for him to read on the return trip."

Devlin shook his head. "These can go in the racks," he said, lifting one of the carpetbags above the bench. As he turned to get the second bag, the train lurched once more as it built up speed.

Cassidy put her hands out trying to balance herself. "Oh no!" she cried as she fell forward. Devlin put his arms out to catch her as she tumbled towards him.

With an *oomph* he landed back on the bench with Cassidy flush against him. He tightened his arms slightly around her waist, holding her in place.

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she leaned up to look at him. Her lips parted slightly, and he spied the tip of her tongue pressed against her teeth. Devlin groaned. He wasn't sure how he was going to survive the trip with such a temptation before him. Perhaps this was a test from God.

"I don't want you to get in the habit of catching me," she said breathlessly.

"Then perhaps you should stop falling?" he offered.

Cassidy blinked at him several times. As he relaxed his grip on her his eyes flew open as she lowered her head. She pressed her lips gently against his as the train rocked once more.

Devlin pushed her away, breaking the kiss that he wanted to go on forever. "Miss Blackwood, please." A look of mortification crossed her face and her skin turned bright red. She scrambled off him and dropped herself in the farthest corner of the car. She wouldn't even look at him. Devlin didn't want her to be embarrassed or upset over the kiss. It was just unexpected. "Miss Blackwood..."

She raised her hand without turning her head. "Please, don't." Her voice came out as a harsh whisper, and he could hear her throat thicken as she choked on the words.

Devlin adjusted his frock and sat up straighter in the seat.

“Tickets please,” a man said sliding the door into its pocket.
“Tickets?”

Devlin picked up the envelope that Cassidy must have dropped when the train rocked and pulled out two tickets, handing them to the conductor. The man tore the bottom portion of the tickets and placed it in a pouch around his waist before handing the stubs back to Devlin.

Without another word the man left, and Devlin turned to see Cassidy staring out the window. He shifted on the bench. He could see her eyes were closed and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

He dragged his hand down his face and exhaled deeply.

This was going to be a very long trip.



CHAPTER SEVEN



She couldn't believe she kissed him!

What was she thinking?

Well, Cassidy, she chastised herself. It is apparent you weren't thinking at all.

She looked out the window, trying desperately to ignore the man sitting across from her. When the train rocked and she fell into him, it felt natural to be in his arms.

Cassidy had never wanted a suitor. She had more important things to do than wait around for some dandy to visit. But there was something about this man that just made her think of things other than books, parks, and funerals.

Sighing, she closed her eyes as the train moved forward. She thought of her family – or what she had left. *Please, Lord, she pleaded. Don't let anything happen to Errietta, George or Briley while I'm traveling. I don't think my heart could take it.* Her thoughts drifted to Devlin. *And please let me get through this trip without making a fool of myself?*

She felt a single tear roll down her cheek. Taking off her glove, she brushed it away with her fingers. She heard movement but didn't want to open her eyes. Bracing her elbow against the window she leaned her head in her palm and tried to sleep, praying that the man who had been haunting her dreams would let her rest for a bit.

She must have fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep, because the next thing she knew, Devlin was gently shaking her awake. She lifted her head from the padded bench and looked around, trying to orient herself.

"Where am I?" she asked softly. She sat up and a light coverlet fell to the seat. "Did you cover me?" She pushed the blanket from her legs.

Devlin moved back to the bench across from her. "You fell asleep. I didn't want to disturb you, you looked like you needed the rest."

"I've not slept properly in a few weeks." She stretched her arms out and rolled her shoulders. "I actually feel quite rested."

"Dinner will start in about fifteen minutes. I didn't know if you wanted to freshen up before we go down to the dining car."

Cassidy looked at him and blinked. No one had ever asked her

before. Normally she was simply told what to do, even if she didn't want to do it. Her father issued requests like commands, and no one dared disobey.

She gave him a timid smile. "Thank you, I would." She stood and held onto the rack above the bench as the train rocked. "I'm learning," she laughed, stepping to keep her balance. She reached her arm out as the train rocked and Devlin grabbed her hand.

"Be careful," he said softly. Her eyes flew to his as his thumb gently caressed the back of her ungloved hand. He didn't linger, pulling his hand away as if he was scorched. She heard him mumble something then he turned in his seat.

"I will." She could still feel the heat of his touch as she cleaned up for dinner. When she opened the privy door, the compartment was empty. Her breath hitched at the thought of being alone. *Where did he go?*

She didn't have long to wonder, as the pocket door slid open, and he walked into the compartment.

"Are you ready?"

"I didn't know if I should change." She held out her skirt, fanning it in the room. "I'm afraid it is rather wrinkled from laying down."

"You look fine. I just took a quick walk to the dining car. You won't be the only person with a wrinkled wardrobe. Fortunately, I don't have to worry about a wardrobe." He smiled, giving Cassidy a glimpse of white teeth behind thin lips.

"Do I need my hat?" It was sitting on the bench where it had fallen while she was asleep. Devlin shook his head. "Then let me grab my reticule and we can go."

He held open the door to allow her to enter the aisle. Several other passengers were also heading towards the dining car.

"Be careful when you cross," he warned.

She pushed the door open, and a strong wind entered the car, pushing her backwards. She felt Devlin's hand on her back, and she took a step out onto the moving platform. The wind caught her skirt causing the fabric to whip around her legs.

It was rather chilly on the platform, so she grabbed ahold of her skirt and lifted it slightly so she could cross between the two cars and get into the warmth of the dining car. Devlin was right behind her.

He was so close to her back, that she could feel the heat radiating off him. There was something about the tall man that made her feel protected. Even though she wasn't fond of the idea at first, she was glad that she wasn't on the trip alone.

She felt his hand once more as he guided her to a small table

underneath a large picture window. It was the biggest window Cassidy had ever seen. She could see for miles. "Where do you think we are?"

"I'm glad you asked," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a map. He snapped it open and placed it on the table. "We left from Chicago around 11 o'clock. Our first major stop is here in Davenport, Iowa. That is 175 miles. So, we should be there around 7 o'clock tonight. Working backwards, I'd say we are about 50 miles outside of there, which puts us about here."

Cassidy wasn't paying attention to the map. She noticed how long his fingers were as he pointed on the map. Just like everything else, his hands dwarfed hers. She placed her hand on the table and pretended to look at the map as she compared the size of their hands.

"That's interesting." She could hear the excitement in his tone but hadn't heard a word that he just said.

He chuckled and pulled the map from the table. "You weren't listening to me, were you?"

Cassidy looked at him. "Of course, I was," she lied. "Jefferson City." She made a fuss over shaking out her napkin and silently prayed the server would arrive. Devlin looked as though he didn't believe her, but he let it slide.

The server walked over to the table. "Good evening," he said handing them each a menu. "While you look over this, may I interest you in some claret or sherry with dinner?"

Cassidy looked at Devlin. "If you would like a glass, go ahead. I'll have coffee," he told the server.

She looked around and noticed a woman picking up a teapot and straining the water through a sieve into her cup. "I'd like tea, please."

"Of course, Miss."

"With milk," she smiled at the man.

"Of course, Miss. I'll be back to get your orders in a few minutes." He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and read from it. "Tonight's specials are baked calves' liver with roasted onions, smoked whitefish with toast points and potato mash, and boiled chicken served with a rutabaga puree."

As he turned to leave, Cassidy let out the laugh she was holding in. "Those sounded absolutely horrid," she said to Devlin.

"Perhaps the rich have finer tastes?"

"Then I guess I will never be rich. I can't imagine eating boiled chicken and rutabagas." She ran her finger down the menu. "Oh look, they have roast beef." She placed her menu aside and looked at Devlin. He had his elbows on the edge of the table and his fingers in a steeple position looking at her. Cassidy patted her hair. "Do I have a

hat pin or something sticking out?"

He shook his head. "No. No hatpin. You are a very interesting woman, Miss Blackwood."

"I could say the same about you, Mr. Kingston."

"Please, call me Devlin. We are going to be on this train for at least another 7 days."

"Then you must call me Cassidy."

"Cassidy..." he let the word roll off his tongue. "That is a beautiful name."

The server returned with their drinks and placed them on the table. After they made their meal request, another server stopped by with bowls of consommé and a basket of rolls. "Oh, these are warm!" she said taking one out of the basket and placing it on the small dish next to the tea pot.

Bread was one of Cassidy's favorite foods. Especially when it was fresh from the oven. She loved slathering the crusts with butter and watching it melt into the dough before devouring it. She was about to reach for the butter dish when she saw Devlin hold out his hand.

She looked at his face, down to his hand and then back to his face. He wiggled his fingers. "I'm going to say the blessing."

"Oh!" Of course. He was a chaplain, so she should have expected it. She slid her hand into his and watched as his fingers curled around hers. Lowering his head, he said a blessing over the food and for safe travels the rest of the journey. "Amen," Cassidy whispered when he was done.

He picked up a roll and buttered it generously before handing it to Cassidy. Taking the one off her plate, he did the same and put it on the edge of his soup bowl.

"Didn't you say a blessing before you ate?"

"Of course, we did," she said. "I was so caught up in the moment I didn't think of it." She bit into the roll with relish and closed her eyes, enjoying the loud crunch as she tore the bread with her teeth. When she opened her eyes once more, she noticed Devlin wasn't eating. He was staring at her with a peculiar look on his face. "Aren't you hungry? If you aren't going to eat that roll, I will."

"I'm sure we can get more." Devlin broke off a piece of bread and dunked it in his soup. "Have you traveled before, Cassidy?" he asked.

She put down the bread and cleared her throat. "Not really. At least not outside of Chicago or Illinois. Father was the one always traveling. You know. For the military." Devlin nodded, so she continued. "We would sometimes go to the lake during the summer and fish. It was nearly a day by wagon, but Father would rent a house

and we would stay there for a full month. It was heavenly.”

“How long ago was that?”

“We were kids. So, it was before the war. He wasn’t the same when he returned.” She bowed her head, placing her hands in her lap.

“Not many men were. I remember when a large group of men left. It was a much smaller group that returned, and no one was the same.”

“How old were you?”

“I was just a boy at the time.”

“How about now?”

“I’m four and twenty.”

“That’s four years older than me.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t married.”

Cassidy shrugged. “I haven’t found anyone that I’d consider marrying.”

“Not anyone?”

“They are all such bores.”

“Bores?”

“Yes. They can argue legislation, but they can’t read a book.”

“Is that why you brought all those books?”

“Yes. Briley loves to read.”

“As, do you?”

“When I have time. I want to travel and see places, but I want to always make sure I have a home to return to.”

“Where would you like to travel?”

Cassidy finished her roll and wiped her fingers on the napkin. “I loved listening to Father’s stories about the places he had visited. The cities and the people. Did you know that the men and women walked across the country? I can’t imagine doing that.”

“They wanted a better way of life.”

“I would love to see the ocean.”

“You’ll have your chance soon.”

“Have you done much traveling, Devlin? You are a learned man.”

Devlin put his spoon down. “A bit. I grew up in Pennsylvania near the coal mines of Scranton. My father owned one of the mines. I went to university in New York and then I traveled to Chicago to study at the seminary.”

They continued the conversation well into the evening. Cassidy couldn’t remember when she last enjoyed a conversation so much. Sleep and a good meal had definitely improved her mood.

After dining on a delicious dinner of roast beef with roasted potatoes and lima beans, they ate warm cottage pudding with a glaze poured on top. Devlin had butterscotch, where she had chocolate. They even sampled each other's desserts to decide which flavor was better. Devlin declared it a tie.

At the end of dinner, Cassidy didn't think she would be able to move. She wondered how improper it would be to loosen her corset when she returned to the compartment. Errietta's voice sounded in her ears. *It would be very improper.* She made a mental note not to eat so much at the next meal.

As they were leaving the dining car, Devlin was stopped by a man and his wife. They recognized his uniform and asked where he was headed. The man served in the Chaplain Corps for nearly twenty years before retiring. Cassidy bristled as they exchanged stories. Reality came down on what was a beautiful dinner that made her forget everything around her. She needed to remember that he worked for the Army; and anyone that supported them was clearly not a friend of hers. No matter how charming, handsome, or un-boring he might be.

When the conversation was concluded, Devlin led Cassidy towards the platform between the two cars. As the door opened and they stepped out into the windy passageway, Cassidy turned and placed her hand on his arm.

"Are you alright, Cassidy?" he asked.

She nodded her head. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for kissing you earlier. It was improper and it won't happen again."

"I'm not," he grinned. Cassidy's eyes opened wide as she looked at him. He gave her a smile that curled her toes. "I may be a chaplain, Cassidy. But I'm a man first." In that instant she wanted to kiss him again. "Let's get you back to the room." He placed his hand on her back once more, guiding her between the cars.

Cassidy turned and walked back to the compartment, his words echoing in her mind.



CHAPTER EIGHT



Devlin bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from chuckling aloud. He could tell that his response to her apology was not what she expected. He greatly enjoyed dinner and he couldn't remember when he had enjoyed a meal more.

Conversation became a game of tit for tat. For every question she wanted to ask, he could ask one in return.

Cassidy. What a lovely name that suited her.

It meant clever, and she certainly was that and more.

He didn't understand why Andrew mentioned that some of the men called her a shrew and there were jokes about taming and claiming her. Devlin had not been prepared for the immediate burst of righteous anger that rose inside him. His reputation for being stoic would be unfounded if something were to happen to Cassidy. He was one to rarely complain or show emotion, but woe be unto the person who caused her harm.

The thought prodded at him, and Devlin reached up to rub his forehead, releasing some of the tension. When dinner was complete, and they started walking back to the compartment, he was stopped by an older man, who was heading west with his wife. The man had been in the Chaplain Corps as well and recognized the pins on Devlin's collar.

It was nice chatting with someone who knew what he was about to experience. After a quick conversation, he turned to find Cassidy looking at him. She looked like all the joy had drained from her face.

Where would be the problem with him talking to the couple in the dining car? He knew she was a Christian, and Reverend Martin even mentioned that they were parishioners at his church. She looked as though she wanted to say something.

Devlin joined her at the end of the car after talking to the couple.

"Are you alright?" he asked, taking her elbow. She nodded, but Devlin wasn't convinced. He led her across the platform between the two cars, his hand never leaving her back. He was afraid if he didn't hold onto her, a swift wind might blow her away.

As they stood on the platform where they entered the car, Cassidy turned and put her hand on his arm.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry for kissing you earlier. It was improper and it won’t happen again.”

Devlin was dumbstruck that she admitted it. He wasn’t as shocked as when the kiss happened but being in his own thoughts as she slept in the car, he had plenty of time to reflect on it.

He was right. She did fit in his arms perfectly. She had curves in all the right places, and he caught a whiff of roses, soap, and cotton. He decided not to bring it up for fear of embarrassing her further. Since he wasn’t a liar, he told her the truth.

“I’m not sorry,” he said, watching her eyes open wide. Her mouth formed a perfect circle, and it took everything inside him not to run his thumb against her lips. “I may be a chaplain, Cassidy. But I’m a man first.” He saw her swallow. It took everything inside him not to kiss her right there on the shaking platform. “Let’s get you back to the room.” He placed his hand on her back once more, guiding her down the hallway.

When they arrived at the room it was apparent the room had been serviced. Clean blankets were stacked on the bench. The one he covered Cassidy with before dinner was gone. The shades were drawn, covering the large picture window in their room. Devlin walked over and peeked behind the shade. It was dark outside. They would be nearing Jefferson City in the next hour.

Cassidy settled in her seat near the window. “What would you like to do this evening? I heard someone say there was dancing in one of the cars.”

He dropped the shade and moved to the bench opposite her. Leaning forward on his knees, he clasped his hands between his legs. “I don’t dance.”

“You can learn.”

“No, Cassidy. It isn’t for me. If you want to go, I can watch you, but I’m not going to dance.”

“Hmmm.” The disappointment was evident on her face. “I would rather stay here, I guess.” She looked around the room as if seeking another topic of conversation that may not have been covered when dining.

“Are you sure you’re alright? You’re very quiet.” His brother had warned him to be worried when a woman went silent. It either meant they were plotting something or were mad.

“I’m fine. It is odd that the further I get from home the freer I feel.” Cassidy answered without looking away from the window.

“What do you mean by that? Are you carrying burdens that you have not cast at the Lord’s feet? Or was something chasing you at

home?"

"Cast my cares on the Lord? I think the Lord has deserted me."

"He doesn't leave you, Cassidy. It means you are the one that has moved away." Casting his cares upon Jesus was something he had been raised to do, and he had found that letting that weight go always made him feel better.

"Why then? Why did he let my parents die? Why did my brother go away? Why am I alone now?"

"There is a reason for everything, Cassidy, whether it's love, birth or death and while those that grieve don't always understand why that happens there is always a reason. Everything is perfect in His timing." He watched her waiting to see what she would do next.

"And my brother getting ill?" She bit her bottom lip waiting for a response.

"Perhaps it took him outside of a battle that would have caused a worse injury. Or the fact that you're on this train headed west and would not be if he hadn't fallen ill. Have you thought of those things?"

Devlin was working hard to keep his tone even. To hide the excitement that he felt rising up in him at the challenges that she made. He wanted to help her, and he loved a good debate.

"And are you thankful that you got saddled with me for the journey? It's not like I'm the best company you could have, and you are not gaining anything from this, no coin, no wife, no favors."

"I did not agree to travel with you for any of those. I could be traveling alone, with no seat companion and no conversation. Wouldn't that be boring? At least this way we can talk together, break bread together and have a conversation if we want to," Devlin pressed.

"You mentioned you have siblings?" Cassidy asked turning slightly to look up at him.

"I have two sisters that are married with children and a brother who is a marshal."

"And you ended up a minister. How different you must be." Her eyes narrowed as she said the last statement.

"We are. I told you at dinner where I grew up. My parents still live there. They are content playing with their grandchildren, as my sisters, both married, live within walking distance. I wanted something more. I had a calling."

"A calling? What's that."

"When the Lord guides you to your true purpose. Mine was to

preach the gospel to as many people as I can.”

“I don’t have a calling.”

“I’m sure you do. But I can’t tell you what that is. You’ll need to figure it out yourself.”

“Do you ever go home?”

“I was there before seminary, but not since.”

“How about your brother?”

“Declan comes home when he is in the area but that hasn’t happened in a few years.” He heard the ring of pride in his voice and was glad that the loneliness of missing Declan didn’t ring through. They had always been inseparable and then his twin had decided to go off chasing the criminals without him.

“But how did you end up in school in Chicago?” Cassidy pressed.

“Our Reverend is friends with the man who ran a nearby seminary, but a fire closed the school down the year before I was to go. After much prayer and counseling, we were able to find a school in Chicago that would accept me right away and so I went. The military is interested in soldiers and doctors. I am terrible at following orders without asking questions or praying about it first. That led me to a path where I serve God, share the good news and care for those in need. I don’t need to carry a gun and take up arms against my fellow man.” He felt the heat in his cheeks and knew that his face had flushed.

“You don’t carry a weapon?” she asked, her mouth hanging slightly agape.

“I don’t carry a military weapon, to march against people.”

“But... how can you protect me without a weapon?” she all but whispered leaning toward him.

The smell of her hair caught him off guard, she smelled like sunshine and something citrusy. He shook his head slightly, not sure if it was to clear his head or to quiet his internal thoughts.

“Just because I don’t flash my revolver around does not mean I do not have one.” He spoke quietly leaning down toward her. “The west is called wild for a reason. There are all sorts of dangers. I know how to use it, but I don’t want to use it. I will though, if I have to.”

Cassidy looked relieved as she sat back in the seat.

“What did you do in the evenings when you were at seminary?”

He leaned back in the seat and stretched his legs to the side, crossing them at the ankles. He could feel the vibration of the steel wheels through his heels. “I’d read. Pray. Write in my journals. Play chess.”

"I don't play chess, but Briley does." She lifted her finger to her lips and bit her nail slightly. "What are you reading?"

"Other than the Bible?" He knew how important reading was to her. "I purchased a copy of this before we left. I thought I'd read it during the evenings." He pulled out a thin booklet. "It's a dime novel."

"What is that one about?" She stretched her arms once more and yawned.

Devlin flipped the book over in his fingers. "I'm not sure. Should we read it together?"

Cassidy grinned. "I'd like that. Very much."

"Very well. Let me get my glasses."

He stood in the middle of the car and pulled down his carpetbag. His spectacles were in the front pocket where he could reach them easily. He didn't always need them, but for reading things like books his eyes would tire after a bit. The glasses helped him be able to read longer.

"How tall are you?"

He looked down to see Cassidy staring up at him. She had placed her tiny foot next to his larger one. His was twice the size.

"I stand at eighty inches," Devlin grinned. He came from a tall family. His mother stood at seventy inches and his father stood at seventy-three. Devlin joked that his twin brother, Declan was losing inches.

Mother insisted on measuring them every time they were home. The last time was three years ago. Devlin was a whole four inches taller than his brother and took every opportunity to let him know. Declan might be several minutes older, but Devlin towered over him.

"That's incredible," she said, flexing her foot. Devlin spied her thin ankle encased in leather. "You are nearly two feet taller than me! How do you even do things?" She was looking at him now and he suddenly felt the urge to fidget.

"What do you mean, how do I do things? I put my pants on one leg at a time like other men. I eat with a fork, bow my head to pray and hold doors open for ladies." He let a chuckle slip out now and slid back in his seat, the book, and spectacles on his lap.

"What about cooking, or using the facilities or picking something up off the floor? Aren't you afraid of falling on your head when you bend over?"

"No. I'm not. You, however, have a penchant for falling over. I think you've done it twice today."

She gave a little laugh. Reaching into the small bag sitting on the

seat next to her, she pulled out a boar's bristle brush. "Excuse me while I take all these pins from my hair. After a while they start to hurt." She used her fingers to feel through her hair and placed the pins in her mouth once she found them. When she was done, she ran her fingers through the strands, shaking out the curls.

Devlin swallowed. *Hard*. He had sisters and had been around them brushing their hair. He just needed to think of Cassidy as a sister. That was it. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Liar, he thought to himself. There was nothing sisterly about Cassidy. She was one hundred percent a woman. He was mesmerized as she ran the brush through her hair, as her lips moved, silently counting the strokes. When she caught him looking at her, she pointed at the book with her hairbrush.

"Aren't you going to read?"

"Can I touch your hair?" His hand slapped against his mouth, and he felt the heat flood into his chest and face. He couldn't believe he said that aloud!

"Can you *what*?" she asked cocking her head to one side.

"I do all of those things that you asked, cooking, using the facilities and picking things up the same as anyone else. The only thing I have to watch for is not hitting my head when I walk through doorways." He hoped she was going to let the other question drop, but the smile on her face reminded him of a cat spying a plump mouse and being ready to pounce.

"And the falling on your head?" she asked as she resumed brushing her hair. "I'm pretty sure you asked to touch my hair, so now I'm wondering if it was you that hit your head today."

"No, no falling today," he mumbled, but he did wish the bench would open and drop him below on the tracks. It couldn't be any worse than what he was experiencing right now. He clamped his mouth shut so tightly his jaw hurt.

"Why?"

She wasn't going to let this drop, was she?

"Why, what?"

"Why do you want to touch my hair?" She twirled the long strands of her hair around a finger and released it in a curl. It would bounce as she grabbed the next strands. This was ridiculous. Her behavior reminded him of the way Miss Clarkson talked to Andrew when they were at the promenade. *Was this flirting?* "Devlin?" Cassidy's face shifted to a look of concern and the toe of her boot bumped against his ankle.

"I'm a man of honor, Cassidy." Did that voice belong to him? It

sounded like he had a horrible cold – the kind where Mother would make an onion poultice for his chest.

“I know you are,” she said softly. She stopped playing with her hair.

“I would never just take liberties, and I apologize for saying anything.”

“But...?” she prodded.

He sighed heavily before he forced the rest of his words out in the open. “I wondered if it was as soft as it looked.”

A smirk flitted across her face as she shifted in her seat. She pointed at the book once more with her hairbrush. “Read,” she demanded.

“Yes ma’am,” Devlin said, opening the small tome. His rich voice filled the compartment. He could see Cassidy’s eyes starting to droop as she finished brushing her hair and placed the brush in her small bag.

He stopped reading when she lifted the blankets and looked under them. Her nose wrinkled as she stood and went to the linen closet. “There aren’t any pillows in here,” she announced.

“I’ll mention it to the steward the next time he comes through.”

He heard her give a little huff. She picked up one of the blankets and moved to sit next to him. He froze when she sat down and draped the coverlet over her legs.

“I can’t hear you over the tracks,” she explained, settling in next to him. She looked at him with expectant eyes. “Can you start over?”

Devlin cleared his throat and flipped to the first page of the book. “The dime dialogues. Number sixteen. Publication date 1875.” He licked his finger and turned the thin paper to the next page. He would have to be careful, lest he tear the pages. “Polly Ann. Scene One. In the sitting room. Polly Ann! Polly Ann! Heavens what a name!”

He continued to read the story of a woman that was invited by an eligible bachelor’s sister to visit for a spell. He heard Cassidy chuckle lightly at some of the more amusing parts. As he continued to read, he felt her shift in the seat, moving slightly away from him.

“To the kitchen I say! Your wages...” he stopped as he felt Cassidy drop her head against his leg. Her eyes were closed, and delicate snores tickled his ears.

She reached from beneath the blanket and rubbed her nose. “Keep, reading,” she murmured.

Devlin wasn’t sure where to put his arm. He draped it on the back of the bench, but his shoulder tired holding it in place. He held the

book in one hand and finally gave in, resting his arm on her shoulder. He read until the delicate snores turned into louder ones. Closing the book, he placed it between the bench and the train wall.

He looked down at Cassidy. Her face was so peaceful. He tried to move, but she was using his leg as a pillow. He knew she hadn't slept apart from the few hours when they first left the station, and he hated to disturb her.

Her hair fanned out around her like a reddish halo. Devlin would let her sleep, but he couldn't resist... *just this once*. His fingertips gently traced her head, picking up one of the curls she wound around her finger.

As he ran his fingertips along her hair, her floral scent filled his nostrils. He groaned silently and looked to Heaven. *God, help me*, he prayed. Her hair was as soft as it looked.



CHAPTER NINE



They had been traveling for four days, but it seemed like forever. There wasn't much to do other than walk the aisle or visit the dining room. Even the meals were becoming too rich for her. What she would do for another one of Errietta's thick ham sandwiches. Devlin and she broke into the basket in the middle of the first night and made a makeshift picnic on the floor of the room. The rest they ate for lunch the following day.

She looked out the window and sighed. She was starting to feel grouchy, but she didn't know why. She wasn't hungry. She had caught up on her sleep. Devlin was a perfect gentleman.

Maybe that was it.

He was a *perfect* gentleman. She flounced in her seat, wishing he wasn't so perfect. She wanted to kiss him again, and soon. Once she returned to Chicago, there would be no more chances for kisses with anyone. She would be labeled a spinster and reliant on the good will of her brother to care for her.

Huffing she looked out the window.

"You seem restless," Devlin noted.

"I don't know. I just have this... I don't know what to call it. I feel like I'm going to explode if I don't get out of here. I want to run, scream or do something."

"There isn't much for you to do on the train, unfortunately."

"That's easy enough for you to say. You get to go out and visit with everyone."

"I'm not visiting, Cassidy. I'm ministering. Those people need someone to guide them on this journey. If I can provide just a little comfort, then it fills my heart." Cassidy looked at him once more then flounced again in the seat. "Why don't you tell me what's wrong."

Cassidy looked out the window. "If I knew I could fix it." The sky was darker on the horizon. "Looks like a storm is brewing. The clouds are large and black."

"Hopefully it is just a shower. We are perfectly safe here in the train."

"I hope so." She didn't like storms. When it thundered in Chicago, the whole house shook.

“Would you like to walk with me tomorrow?”

“What would I do?”

“You could help with some of the children while I pray with their mothers. There are many women traveling without their husbands.”

“Really?” Cassidy sat up in her seat. “I’d like that.”

“I’d like that too. Why don’t you read for a bit?”

Cassidy stood, careful not to hit her head on the luggage rack. She pulled down her carpetbag and opened it, removing her journal from the bag. When she undid the ribbon holding the leather around the bound pages, a paper fluttered to the seat.

“Oh, I forgot that Errietta put a letter in my bag.”

“What does it say?”

“Let me read it.” She held the wrinkled letter in her hand and scanned the words on the page written in Errietta’s delicate penmanship.

Dearest Cassidy,

While I know this journey is something that you felt like you had to do, I miss you already. Knowing that I wrote these words to you before you ever left, I’m hoping that you will find as much comfort in them as I did in writing them. This is your first big adventure on your own and I know that you will be all right.

Let me remind you that Devlin is there to escort you. He will protect you and defend you. His accompaniment is a favor to the family, not from a desire to be paid. He is an honorable man, Cassidy.

Men, while physically strong, are rarely as emotionally intelligent as a woman. Nor are they always good with words. So please try to do your best not to mortally wound his ego.

Remember to pray, refill your water when you make stops, and always get off the train when there is time. Remember to eat and for everyone’s sake please try to sleep as well. You know how grouchy you can be when you’ve not slept.

You will do well. You may get to California and just decide not to return home. That is alright. George and I will always be here when you need us. All you need to do is write. Remember, darling Cassidy, this will always be your home.

Errietta

Cassidy folded the note and slid it between the pages of her journal. Errietta was correct. Devlin was a man of honor. There was a reason he was a perfect gentleman the entire trip. She had never felt so protected or heard. He listened to her stories. Answered her questions. And when she was starting to get grouchy, he made sure

she was fed or had a nap.

Thinking of how kind he was, she felt her eyes burn with unshed tears. *Why hadn't she read Errietta's letter at the beginning of the trip?*

"Are you alright?" he asked. She nodded dumbly before taking a moment to collect herself.

"I didn't realize that leaving home seemed so final," she said quietly.

"The first-time leaving home is always the hardest. But you still have a home in Chicago."

Cassidy shook her head. "I don't think so. Errietta alludes that I might want to stay in California once I get there."

"Would that be so terrible?"

Cassidy looked at him in shock. "I'm going to get my brother and bring him home. I have no desire to be on that... that... base."

"The military isn't that terrible, Cassidy. It provides an honest living; the pay is fair, and the people are honest and hardworking. They raise families right there on the base."

"Why didn't my father take us with him then?"

"Where was he stationed?"

"I don't recall. Somewhere east of the Mississippi."

"Maybe they didn't have married housing. Or a place to raise children. Some of the bases are very small. Did your mother have family in Chicago?"

Cassidy nodded. "She was born and raised there."

"Then it would make sense that your father would sacrifice by not moving you with him. He wanted you to be surrounded by your extended family and friends."

Cassidy hadn't thought of that. She felt terrible when she recalled all the hateful things she said to her father before his passing. She blamed the military for separating them, but maybe it was her father's choice after all.

"The only family I have left are Briley, Errietta and George."

"They seem like they're good people. Are they your aunt and uncle?"

"No. they worked for my parents. After father died, Mama and Errietta became very close. They were close before, but after Father was gone, they no longer worked for my family. They were more like an aunt and uncle, I guess. They are very good people. Very, very good." She pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Where is the next stop?"

Devlin pulled out his map and she watched his finger trace the

lines on the paper before he consulted his pocket watch. "Sharon's Spring. We should be there by lunchtime tomorrow." Cassidy was tired of talking, so she nodded and returned to looking out the window. "Aren't you going to read?"

"No," she whispered, rubbing her brow. "I'm actually very tired. I might nap before dinner."

Devlin patted the bench next to him. "If you need a pillow, just let me know."

With one last glance out the window, she returned her journal to the bag and moved to the second bench and sat on the far edge next to Devlin. There was a coverlet which she used to cover her legs. "Thank you," she said, as she leaned down, placing her head on his thigh. The wool of his trousers tickled her nose.

"Let's get you covered," he offered, leaning over to pull the blanket up to her neck. "Close your eyes and just rest."

Cassidy nodded and soon her eyes grew heavy. She could feel Devlin's hand gently rubbing circles on her back in time with the clickety-clack of the train wheels. Closing her eyes, she counted to ten and promptly fell asleep.



Devlin watched Cassidy sleep; she didn't wake up the entire night.

He was starting to feel conflicted. He greatly enjoyed her company, and he knew it was going to be very difficult to let her go once they arrived in San Francisco. He knew he was going to have a lot of work preparing to take over several of the services at the Presidio. There wouldn't be much, if any, time for a wife.

A wife?

After only a few weeks, was he really considering Cassidy for his wife?

He recited everything he knew about her.

Cassidy Blackwood was the only daughter of a career general who was famous for leading his men with honor and dignity. Her father had a reputation for caring greatly for the men under his command that he would keep in touch with many of them after they left the service.

He recalled Reverend Martin calling her spirited... and Andrew, well he didn't want to think about what Andrew called her. But he didn't find her either of those. He found her simply delightful. She kept him on his toes with strong conversation and plans. Plans, it

appeared, that didn't include the military.

He gingerly lifted her head so he could find something to eat and use the facilities. When he returned, she was still sound asleep, but she had rolled over and was now sprawled out over the bench. He placed a plate containing cold slices of meat, cheese and pickles covered with a napkin on the luggage rack just in case she decided to wake up during the night, she would have something to eat.

It was too dark to read, so he grabbed a blanket and sat on the bench where Cassidy normally sat. Leaning against the wall he draped the blanket over his shoulders and closed his eyes, promptly falling asleep with thoughts of a blue-eyed redhead filling his dreams.

He slept through the night, only waking up when he heard a loud hum fill the air.

Cassidy was already awake and sitting on the bench when he woke up.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully.

Devlin groaned and rolled his neck. "Good morning." Stretching his arms until he heard his back pop, he looked at Cassidy. She had changed out of the traveling dress she had worn for the past few days, into a dark skirt with a white blouse. A small cameo was pinned at her collar, and she wore a watch on a long chain around her neck. Her hair, which she normally wore up, was pulled back in a bow. She looked refreshed ... and very young.

He wondered how old she was. *Twenty*. He remembered her saying something about him being four years older than her, the first night on the train.

Cassidy let loose a giggle. "Did you know you snore?"

Devlin rubbed his hand down his face and tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes. Yawning, he stretched once more. "It can't be any worse than you."

She let loose a mock gasp. "I would never snore."

"You sounded like a lumberjack. Sawing wood."

Cassidy laughed once more, and the sound went straight to his heart. He wanted to hear more of her laughter.

"Get ready, I want to eat breakfast."

"Yes ma'am," he said smiling at her. As he walked to the facilities, he turned and looked at her once more. "You look beautiful this morning, Cassidy."

She beamed under his praise. "Thank you."

Ten minutes later they were walking to the dining car. The humming was getting louder. "Do you hear that?" he asked her.

Cassidy tilted her head. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure." He opened the door between the two train cars. Placing his hand on her back to guide her had become a habit. If she minded, she didn't say a word.

The dining car was full when they walked into it.

"It will be just a few minutes," a steward informed them.

Devlin saw the couple from dinner the first night sitting at a table. The man raised his hand and called Devlin over.

"Come sit with us," he offered.

"Thank you, we will." Devlin pulled the chair out for Cassidy and once she had adjusted her skirt, he tucked the chair back under the table.

"Name's Charlie Morris. This is my wife, Lorena."

"Good morning," Cassidy said. "My name is Cassidy. Thank you for letting us join you."

"It is our pleasure," Lorena said. "We were just saying that even though the train is full of people, it can be rather lonely going on one of these long excursions."

"Where are you headed?" Devlin asked, as the waiter put a cup of hot coffee in front of him.

"We are going to California to visit our son. It has been a long trip," Charlie said. "Nearly a full seven days so far."

"Where do you live that it would take so long?" Cassidy wondered.

Charlie wiped his mouth on a napkin. "We came from Boston. Our son moved to California when he joined the military. We've not been out to visit him in several years. He and his wife just had their first child, and we can hardly wait to meet him."

"Do you have any children?" Lorena asked. She looked from Cassidy to Devlin. "I bet you have beautiful children."

"Oh no," Cassidy exclaimed. "We don't have children. In fact, we aren't even married."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "That isn't right, son," he said turning to Devlin. "You cannot be a man of the cloth and consorting with an unmarried woman."

Devlin took a sip of his coffee before answering. "You are correct. But we aren't consorting. I'm escorting her, at the request of her family, to bring her to the Presidio. Her brother was ill."

"Oh," Lorena sighed. "You just look so natural together, so I assumed... well, never mind." She turned to Cassidy. "Your family chose a fine escort for you."

"Yes ma'am," Cassidy responded. She looked at Devlin and smiled.

By the time he finished his second soft-boiled egg, the sky was becoming darker. "Looks like we might be going into the storm. Hopefully that will get rid of the humming I've been hearing."

"Humming?" Charlie wondered.

Cassidy nodded. "I heard it too. Almost like a loud whirring noise. Have you ever heard anything like this before?"

"I remember reading in the paper that last year there was a swarm of locust so bad it decimated the crops and turned the sky as black as night. Large hordes of them." He snorted. "Wouldn't that be something."

"I can hear the humming now that you mention it," Lorena added.

"I thought the locust were gone," Devlin reached up, rubbing his face. He had gone back and studied the scriptures after hearing about the last year's locust plagues. What he'd found about the plagues historically was that Moses had experienced this in Egypt when he rescued the Israelites.

"The ones from last year are gone, but I'm thinking no one thought about all those eggs they probably laid."

"I don't think I want to see any locust, thank you." Cassidy shook her head as if warding off any possibility of the bugs.

"They won't hurt you, Cassidy," Devlin tried to comfort her. "They might eat everything they can find, but I don't think you are on the menu."

"I pray not." Cassidy tried to remember what the Bible said about locusts.

The humming grew louder, and Devlin looked out the window. The cloud was coming faster, devouring the sunlight as it moved towards the train.

Several people had moved to the windows to watch the cloud approach. Devlin ignored the crowd until he heard Cassidy scream as the first large brown insect hit the window.

Panic broke out in the dining car. Women were yelling or crying as locust after locust pummeled the windows. Stewards started lighting candles as the bugs took every bit of daylight.

"Please stay in your seats," one of the stewards called. "There is no need to panic."

A few moments later the conductor came into the car. "Attention, please," he called. "There is a large swarm of locust covering most of Denver. We won't be stopping at Sharon's Spring. Instead, we will travel directly to Denver where the station is larger and there is lighting." Murmurs went through the crowd. "We advise you to return to your rooms. The train will stay in Denver until the tracks are

cleared.”

“How long will that be?” one passenger asked.

“Don’t know. I hope not more than a day or two.”

“When will we get to Denver?” another called.

“In about eight hours. The tracks are covered with locust, and we need to wait for this storm to pass. We will be still moving, just a bit slower.”

Several other passengers started shouting out questions.

“What should we do, Devlin?” Cassidy asked. He could hear the worry in her voice.

“We’ll just go back to the compartment and see what happens in Denver.”

They finished their coffee and walked to the back of the car. Cassidy slid the door open and a locust flew in the car. She screamed, waving her hands in the air. “Get it off of me,” she cried.

“It’s not on you. Let’s keep going as you are going to let them in.”

She hesitantly stepped out on the platform. Devlin could hear bugs crunching under their feet, and the hum from the wings was deafening. Cassidy didn’t wait for Devlin, she hopped over the platform as quickly as she could and disappeared into the private car. He followed suit, closing the car door behind him.

“Are there any on me?” Cassidy asked, turning left and right.

“Hold still and turn around.” Devlin put his hands on her shoulders. Picking a brown insect from her hair, he cracked the door open and tossed it outside. “I don’t see anymore.”

Cassidy was shaking her skirt. Three more locusts fell from the folds in the fabric. She shrieked and started to dance. “They are everywhere.”

“There are only three.” Devlin turned around. “Do I have any on my back?”

“There are two clinging to your cloak.”

“Do you mind brushing them off?” With a thud he felt Cassidy’s reticule slap against his back. “I said brush them off, not bruise me in the process.”

“Oh goodness. I’m sorry, I just hate insects. All kinds of insects.”

Another couple was crossing the platform. “Let’s get to the room and prepare to get off at Denver. I have a feeling there are going to be many more bugs in the car shortly.”

He could hear the woman on the platform shrieking as he guided Cassidy to their room and closed the door behind them.



CHAPTER TEN



“Devlin,” Cassidy whispered, gently laying her hand on his arm. “Devlin, wake up.”

He must have fallen asleep. Blinking his eyes open, he wasn’t surprised to see that the train car was completely dark. He reached out for her hand on his arm so that she would know he was awake.

“What time is it?” he asked, running his thumb over the top of her hand. *How is she so soft after days on the train?*

“It was just after four when I looked at my pocket watch last but that was a while ago. I imagine we should be there soon.” Her voice quivered and he heard the muffled sobs in the darkness.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart.” He felt for her arms in the darkness and pulled her close, tucking her under his arm. Kissing the top of her head, he murmured, “Everything will be alright. I promise.”

He felt Cassidy nod her head. “I must have fallen into a deep sleep.”

“Well, the sound of the locust is rather hypnotic.”

He tightened his grip around her, pulling her into a side hug. He felt her lift her head slightly. Devlin moved his and the sound of two heads colliding filled the car.

“Ow!” Cassidy cried. He could feel her moving away in the darkness, but then she was back. “That is going to leave a bump.”

Devlin felt in the darkness and found Cassidy’s face. Her hair tickled his fingers. He walked his hand around her face, imagining her eyes, pert nose, and full lips. As his fingers caressed her cheek, he heard the little hitch of her breath. “I’m sorry,” he said into the darkness.

“It’s alright.” Her voice was a husky whisper. “Devlin?”

“Hmmm?” He pulled her a little closer.

“Wh-wh-would you kiss me?”

“I could think of nothing I would like more.” He cupped her chin and tilted it slightly. Slowly lowering his head so they didn’t hit each other again, he pressed his lips against hers. It was the sweetest kiss he had ever had. He felt Cassidy reach her arms up around his neck and pull him even tighter. By the time they broke the kiss, they were both breathless.

“Devlin?”

“Yes, Cassidy?”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you. Do you feel better?” he asked. He could feel her put her head against his chest and nod. Giving her another kiss on the crown of her head, he rested his cheek on her soft hair. “We should be there soon.”

He heard Cassidy softly whisper the Lord’s Prayer. He held her hand and joined in saying the words he had come to love so well.

When they were done, Cassidy made no move to leave the warmth of his embrace. Devlin slid down in the seat just a bit, so he was more comfortable. He could get used to having Cassidy in his arms. If they were fortunate, they might have a few days in Denver where he could spend more time with her. He knew he wouldn’t have much time for courting before she went back to Chicago, so he needed to make every moment count.

“I was thinking,” he said in the darkness.

“Hmmm?”

“What if you were to stay in California?”

“I need to go home.”

“I mean marry me and make a new home, a new life out here.”

“I – I don’t think so. I don’t want to be a military wife.”

“Think about it, Cassidy.”

“You’ll find someone out there and forget all about me.”

“I doubt I could ever forget you.”

He tightened his arm around her shoulders and silently prayed. *Lord, I know that all things are perfect in your time, and I thank you for this blessing of getting to know Cassidy. If it is your will, please let her realize that we should be together.* He sent the silent praise upwards before closing his eyes once more.



When they pulled into the train station in Denver, Cassidy held both bags while Devlin lugged the trunk since there wasn’t a steward available to help.

“Can I help you, mister?” a young boy approached them with a wagon. “Five cents to carry your luggage.”

“You have yourself a deal, young man,” Devlin said putting the trunk on the wagon. The sound of bugs cracking under the luggage

made Cassidy squeamish. At least the locusts weren't swarming now. Instead, they covered every imaginable surface in town.

"Wait here for a moment while I find out where the hotel is."

"Ain't no hotel available."

"How do you know that?" Cassidy asked.

"Been a lot of people needing their luggage hauled. You best be seeing the sisters at the boarding house."

"I'll be right back," Devlin said. Cassidy watched as he walked through the bugs and talked to the station master. When he returned, he took one of the bags from Cassidy. "He suggested the Broad Street Boarding House, too."

"Told ya," the boy chimed in. He tugged on the wagon, trying to get it to move. Devlin gave it a push to get started and soon they were walking up the road several blocks to the boarding house.

When the houses came in view, Cassidy was shocked to see a line already forming at the boarding house. It didn't look very large, and she wondered how, or if, all those people would be able to stay there. The line at the gentlemen's house next door was much shorter. Most folks without family in the area, opted to stay on the train instead of venturing in town.

Devlin had warned her to stay close in case the locust tried to take off. He didn't want to lose her in the swarm, he said.

Cassidy let her fingers ride along the fence post tops as they passed them on their way to the boarding houses. She was thankful that she had packed a change of clothes in her carpetbag. Perhaps the Cartwright sisters would be kind enough to let her wash her traveling dress before they had to leave again.

"Oh, the house is lovely!" She stopped looking up at the porch. Someone had lit several hurricane lamps and set them on the stairs of the boarding house. "How long do you think we will be here for?" Cassidy asked.

"The stationmaster said that it might be a week before they were able to get the train running through again, due to the locusts."

"A week?" Cassidy said.

"Think about it, Cassidy. The limited visibility and the sheer number of locusts getting trapped in the smokestack would prevent them from running the train."

"What about my brother?"

"I'll get telegrams sent off to Errietta and George right away, letting them know where you are. I also need to contact Chaplain Taylor at the Presidio letting him know of my delay. I'll ask about

your brother in my correspondence,” Devlin assured her.

She felt the weight of his hand on her waist moments before something grabbed the hem of her skirt.

“Let go! Let go!” Cassidy shouted suddenly, panicking. She turned in a circle trying to find what had grabbed her skirt.

“It’s just a chicken. Look. They are going after the bugs.”

Cassidy shook out her skirt. “Scoot,” she said to the chicken, using the fabric to push it away. When she looked around, she could see plump hens racing from one bug to the next, gobbling them up like sweets. Cassidy grimaced. At least it meant fewer bugs. There were several geese waddling through town. “Is that ordinary?” she asked, pointing to the large birds gulping down the locust.

“They eat bugs of all kinds. Just stay away from them. They can be rather aggressive. Especially if they think you have food.”

“I didn’t know that about ducks. For a military man, you certainly seem to know a lot about a lot of things.”

“Those are geese, not ducks. It has nothing to do with the military. As you said. I’m a learned man. Besides, someone always had chickens and geese running free in Pennsylvania. Once you are chased by a hissing goose, you learn to avoid them.” They finally arrived at the door of the boarding house. “Remember, if you need anything I’ll be right next door.”

“I will.” Somehow the thought of being apart from Devlin filled her chest with a feeling she couldn’t describe.

“Perhaps you can ask the Cartwright sisters about their dinner rules, and I’ll ask the Palmers as well.”

“I’d like that.”

Devlin raised his hand and knocked firmly on the door without taking his eyes off Cassidy.

“Can I help you?” A middle-aged woman with a dour look on her face asked, as she stood with the door barely cracked open.

“Yes, I’m hoping that you have a room available,” Cassidy stepped forward with a friendly smile on her face. “We are part of the train passengers that are stuck in town.”

“Not for him. He’ll have to see the Palmers next door,” the woman stated flatly.

“Yes ma’am, I’m aware. I just wanted to make sure that my charge is settled before I go see about my own accommodations.” Devlin stepped back and inclined his head slightly towards Cassidy. He hoped that the mistress of the boarding house would be more friendly than this maid. He didn’t want Cassidy to be unwelcome simply for being

accompanied by him.

“I’m fine Devlin. I’ll see about dinner accommodations and get myself settled.” Cassidy patted his arm before picking up her satchel and following the woman into the boarding house. The door shut firmly behind them, and Cassidy wondered if she had imagined the sound of the lock clicking into place as they entered further into the house.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Are you the mistress of the house?” Cassidy asked following the dour looking maid into the front hall hoping that perhaps now that Devlin was gone, the woman would be a bit friendlier.

With a sharp shake of her head, the woman pointed to the left and without a second glance at Cassidy she disappeared down the hallway. Cassidy hadn’t meant to upset her, but she also wasn’t surprised. Errietta did not speak to people when they arrived at the house unannounced. The woman wasn’t rude, she just wasn’t warm either.

Glancing around the hall she noted that it was very cozy, and rather comforting. Moving into the room on the left, Cassidy was excited to see a piano in one corner.

I wonder if they would mind if I played.

Looking over the rest of the room, she found that everything had been done in rich blue tones. Just being in the environment already brought a sense of peace and calm over her. It was the perfect environment to meet new people...or perhaps a temptation to get someone to relax enough not to guard themselves and the secrets they kept.

Moving to the fireplace, she eyed the portrait above and felt tears prick at her eyelids. He made her think of papa, and how far from home she truly was. So focused on the portrait and her own memories, she hadn’t heard anyone approach until the sound of a throat clearing broke the air.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I was wool gathering.” Cassidy apologized, turning to find two old ladies watching her thoughtfully.

“Not at all dear,” one of them said.

“It happens to all of us at some point,” the other replied.

“Are you the proprietresses?” Cassidy asked, smiling at them.

“We are,” the first one said. Her gray hair was caught in a glittering clip, and her dress was made of dark burgundy velvet. “I’m Sophia, the eldest, and this is my younger sister, Sybil.”

“How do you do.”

“What is your name, child?” Sybil asked.

“Oh, forgive me. I’m Cassidy Blackwood.”

“Cassidy... Cassidy. Why does that name sound familiar, sister?”

“Remember that Orietta mentioned she would be coming. Her sister, Errietta, lives in Chicago and sent a letter about this young lady needing a place for the night. She stopped by last week to tell us.”

“That’s right.”

“We saved a room just for you. Although I expected you sooner.”

“The train was stopped due to the locust. It took longer than first thought to get here.”

“Oh, yes,” Sybil said excitedly. “The locust. Mr. Abernathy said they could last a week or longer.” The sigh when she said Mr. Abernathy’s name wasn’t lost on Cassidy. It appeared the sister must be sweet on the station master.

“Let’s show you to your room,” Sophia said, ignoring her sister’s wistful sigh.

“Was that your intended?” Sybil asked, her eyes glowing with excitement.

“No,” Cassidy answered quickly. Perhaps a little too quickly given the expressions on the sisters’ faces. She tried to ignore Devlin’s proposal. “He’s a chaplain that is escorting me on this trip.”

“Shame. What a fine-looking couple you make. I saw you walking up the path together. Why he’s so tall and handsome...” Sybil’s voice dropped off dreamily.

“No. It’s nothing like that. I’m headed to California to collect my brother. He’s ill.”

“Oh dear. That’s not good,” Sybil said.

“He’s the only family I have left, and I plan to take him from the Presidio and bring him home.”

Sybil giggled. “Oh, he’s a military man. My, they look handsome in their uniforms.”

Cassidy caught herself before she could speak out of turn. The women didn’t want to hear her feelings about the military or anything else. “I guess...,” she said.

“Ah, fulfilling family responsibilities and falling in love along the way.” Sybil continued as if Cassidy had not disagreed. Cassidy looked over to find Sophia studying her.

“Do you prefer morning light or afternoon light?” Sophia asked suddenly.

“I prefer morning light, but are you getting any right now? It has been so very dark the last few days.”

“We have not had much light, though there are occasional breaks. We’ve found that on the second floor there is more light available. Unfortunately, we do not have any attic rooms. This does not happen

often.” Sophia responded heading for the staircase.

“No, after last year they said that surviving meant this wouldn’t happen again. But I just don’t think they considered all those baby locusts that would be coming this year. That’s like having a blizzard in October and being surprised about the baby boom in July.” Sybil said following behind them.

“Sybil! That is highly inappropriate.” Sophia glanced back at Cassidy. “Your gentleman friend is not a smoker, correct?” Cassidy shook her head. She hadn’t seen Devlin with any type of tobacco. “You are welcome to have callers until eight o’clock, but only in the parlor. Dinner is served at precisely six, and the front door is locked at ten. This is not a hotel, it is our home and if you are not here by the time the doors are locked, you risk being locked out.”

“Yes ma’am,” Cassidy smiled, she did not plan to be going anywhere, though now that she thought about it, it would be nice to be able to chat with Devlin. It was odd now that she realized he wasn’t with her. His presence had become familiar and something of a comfort.

“None of that now, dear. You must call me Miss Sophia, and my sister is Miss Sybil otherwise things just get confusing. Mary is the woman who opened the door, she is not much of a talker, but she makes a wonderful roast on Sundays.” Sophia said while moving down the hallway, “There are eight rooms on this floor, the bathing room is on the main floor and the other amenities are out back. If you would like a soak, let Mary know and she’ll heat the water for you. Your room is a dollar per week and that includes a small breakfast and a full dinner every day.”

She stopped at the second door on the left, opening the door, letting Cassidy walk in first. The room was done in light purples, all the touches around the room reminded her of lilacs in the springtime. The room wasn’t large, but it wasn’t overly small. The bed looked soft and inviting.

All she wanted was a quick wash and to curl up on that lovely bed and rest. She must still be recovering from everything that happened in the months prior.

“Do you like the room?” Miss Sophia asked, hopefully.

“It’s lovely.” Cassidy grinned, reaching into her reticule to pull out two fifty cent pieces. “I’d like to pay you for the week, though I’m not sure I will be here that long. But I’m happy to pay the extra bit for such a restful place.”

“That sounds delightful. We’ll leave you to clean up and when you’re ready you can join us for tea. We shall chat a bit before dinner is ready. We’d like to know all about you, as a new guest. I’m sure you

understand.”

“I do.”

“There is water in the basin if you wish to freshen up.”

“Thank you,” Cassidy said, closing the door behind her.

She looked around and realized she didn’t have her trunk. Thank goodness she had a dress in her carpetbag. Errietta insisted she had a change of clothes with her in case her trunk was lost. Dismissing the thought, she knew that Devlin probably had taken it to the boarding house next door.

Might as well get cleaned up, she thought and go enjoy tea with the sisters.



Cassidy sat at the table with several other women that were staying at the boarding house, two men and Devlin. She counted him separately because the men were beaux of the two women. He had cleaned up from the journey, perhaps even taken a bath and wore a fresh frock.

Cassidy looked down at her dress. It was the same one she had been wearing for the past twenty-four hours. She didn’t have anything else to wear. She felt frumpy and grouchy. Why, she wasn’t sure. Perhaps it was the sisters fawning over Devlin.

He was a chaplain, for goodness’ sake.

I may be a chaplain, Cassidy. But I’m a man first, Devlin had said. The words still echoed in her brain.

“Dinner was absolutely wonderful, Miss Sophia and Miss Sybil,” Devlin said wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“The prayer you said before supper,” Sybil grinned, “was just delightful.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Sophia stood. “If you would like to retire to the sitting room, I’ll have coffee served. Remember all callers must be gone by eight o’clock.”

Cassidy stood and waited for Devlin before walking into the sitting room. He didn’t place his hand on her back as he guided her. Such a small thing, but it was a comfort Cassidy didn’t know she would miss.

They sat in the room drinking coffee and making small talk. Cassidy tuned it out, instead focusing on Devlin. He paid attention to each of the people in the room, asking direct questions and offering Godly advice when needed. Soon it was time for them to depart.

So soon? Cassidy thought. *She didn't get a chance to spend any time alone with Devlin.*

As they walked to the door, he gently grasped her arm. "A word, Cassidy?"

She looked at the sisters. "Go ahead, dear. I'll stand on the porch and wait for you."

Cassidy walked the few steps down the porch to the garden area.

"Is your room alright? Do you need anything?"

No. Yes. I need you to hold me again, she thought.

"No. I'm fine. The room is lovely," she said. "I'm missing my trunk."

"It's at the boarding house I am staying at. I'll have it brought over in the morning." Cassidy nodded. He lifted her chin with his fingers. "Something else is on your mind, but I won't press you now. Did you think about what I said on the train?"

"Can we wait until we get to California?"

"Of course. But if you change your mind, you know where I am."

"I do," she whispered as she returned to the porch. Miss Sybil grabbed her arm, holding her tight as they watched Devlin leave the garden and stroll towards the house next door.

"He is a delightful man, Cassidy. You are very lucky. I can tell he loves you very much."

"We've not known each other long," Cassidy objected.

"Who says you have to know each other for a certain amount of time? Love has its own schedule."

"He has a calling. His whole life is devoted to the service of others."

"Perhaps you have a calling too."

"I'm not sure what that would be."

"Maybe your calling is to support him as a Godly wife so he can do the Lord's work." Cassidy didn't respond. Sybil patted her arm. "Let's go inside. The noise of the locust is ringing my ears."

Cassidy stood on the porch, and watched Devlin disappear into the house next door, then she followed the sister inside.



CHAPTER TWELVE



Cassidy paced the sitting room. She hadn't seen Devlin in three evenings and she was going to go mad. *How did she miss him that much?*

Her dreams were filled with scenes of watching him minister to the congregation, spending time with those that needed it. It was as if she was looking in on his life. But he always stood in front of her at the end of the dream. He walked towards her with a small child in his arms. The child looked exactly like Briley did at that age. She felt content knowing her brother had a child.

Devlin stopped and she could see his mouth moving, but she couldn't hear the words he was saying.

As she was about to yell, she woke up, her pillow wet with perspiration.

She wiped her face with her sleeve and lay back down on the pillow. She thought about the times she felt the happiest. Most of them occurred in the last week.

When she was with Devlin, and they were praying together.

He was right. It wasn't God that moved, she did. She was so angry she moved further away from the loving God she once knew. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and fumbled in the darkness for the candle and matchbox. It took several tries before the smell of sulfur tickled her nostrils and the match hissed. Lighting the candle, she slid from the bed and knelt by the side.

She could feel the cool wood beneath her knees.

"Lord?" she started hesitantly. She clasped her hands together and shut her eyes tight. "I need to talk to you...."

She finally felt the same peace she had when she prayed with Devlin come over her. She would be sure to tell him the next time she saw him.

Cassidy had tea later that afternoon with the sisters, but much of her time was spent seeking glances of him between the locust swarming on the windows.

"It won't make him appear any quicker. Those locusts are swarming right now, you can't go outside."

"I know," Cassidy said looking at Sybil. "It's just—"

"It's just that you love him."

"I do."

"Then you need to tell that nice young man as soon as you can."

"I think I will do that."

Sybil sipped her tea. "I love a good romance," she said between sips.

Cassidy smiled and turned to look out the window, hoping once more to see a glimpse of the man she loved.



It was another two days before the locust disappeared and Cassidy could look down the street. She was ready to come out of her skin. She looked at the boarding house next door and didn't see any movement.

Biting her lip, she wondered how improper it would be to go next door.

Very improper if the sisters had anything to say about it.

No matter how much of a romantic Miss Sybil was, there were still rules to follow.

She could see the livery from where she was standing. A man handed the reins of his horse to the stable boy and started walking towards the boarding house.

It was him!

"Miss Sophia! Miss Sybil!" she called, gathering up her wrap. "I'll be right back." She didn't wait for a response before she ran out the front door and through the garden gate. She felt the air was about to burst her lungs as she approached Devlin. As she got closer, the heel of her boot caught on the lace binding. She felt herself falling forward. "Ooaf!" she cried just as a pair of steel arms wrapped around her.

"Whoa, little miss," he said, setting her right on the street. "What's your hurry?"

Cassidy glanced quickly at Devlin. He was dressed in different clothes than she was used to. Instead of a frock or collar, he had a linen shirt, a cowhide jacket and was wearing dark blue pants. A leather whip was attached to a belt and a holster wrapped around his leg. But it was Devlin!

"Where did you get those clothes?" She threw her arms around his neck, not caring if anyone saw her. "Never mind. I just wanted to tell you that I found my calling. Miss Sybil helped me figure it out. God

put us together so I can help you be the best man you can be. Your helpmate. I love you so much and I would be honored to marry you,” she said as she planted kisses on his cheeks.

She felt Devlin stiffen in her arms. He grasped both of her arms and removed them from around his neck. “I don’t know you, lady, but I have no intention of marrying anyone.”

Cassidy dropped her hands by her side and tried to keep back the tears that were building up inside her. “But Devlin...”

“Devlin? My name’s not Devlin.”

Cassidy blinked once, then twice, before she noticed the star pinned to the man’s chest. “You look just like him. I am so sorry.”

“I have a brother named Devlin. He’s my twin, in fact.”

“Declan?”

“And you are?”

“Cassidy Blackwood.”

“Well Cassidy Blackwood. It appears my brother proposed to you and you’re saying yes. What say we go find him?”

Cassidy looked at the man in front of her. Now she could see slight differences between the brothers. Declan’s hair was long and tied in the back with a leather strip. His nose was a bit sharper than Devlin’s and his forehead was a bit longer.

“I’d like that.”

“I’ve been on a horse fighting these locusts, so if you can handle a smelly cowboy escorting you, I’d be honored, ma’am.” He offered her his forearm.

“I’m the one that should be honored.” She placed her fingers on his arm. “Let’s go find my Devlin.” As they walked down the road, Cassidy looked at her future brother-in-law. “I should have known you weren’t Devlin.”

“How’s that?”

Cassidy smiled. “He’s taller than you.”

Declan threw back his head and laughed. “Yet, I’m older.”



“Dearly beloved.” The preacher’s voice rang out strong and true as he said the words joining Devlin and Cassidy as one. The service was simple, held in the sitting room of the boarding house.

Devlin couldn’t believe it when Cassidy showed up at the boarding house with his brother. When they told him what happened, Devlin

laughed so hard he cried.

The sisters wasted no time in arranging a wedding and Devlin was grateful that Cassidy would be truly his for the rest of the ride to California and every day thereafter.

Declan escorted Cassidy to the front of the sitting room. Devlin didn't think he had ever seen anyone so beautiful as his bride. He had to wipe his eyes as she approached.

He was so focused on the love radiating from her face, that he barely heard the minister's words. He recited his vows, never taking his eyes from her.

Cassidy repeated her vows and Devlin heard her voice crack as she promised to love, honor, cherish him for the rest of their lives.

He slipped a thin gold band on her finger, pressing a kiss to it, after stating the words he longed to say. "With this ring..." He was grateful that Declan went to the mercantile and purchased one on his behalf.

Devlin didn't waste any time capturing his wife's lips once the preacher gave him permission to kiss the bride.

"Isn't it romantic, sister?" he heard Miss Sybil say.

"I can't imagine. Twins!" the older sister said, wiping her eyes.

"What are your plans now, brother?" Declan asked.

"The train is pulling out tonight, and we will be on it. I need to get to California as soon as possible."

"And I need to see my brother," Cassidy chimed in.

Devlin had received a telegram from Chaplain Taylor that Briley had what was known as yellow fever. A condition that plagued many of the men that were marching in wet conditions. The warm wet soil was a breeding ground for mosquitos that carried the virus. The fever finally broke, but Cassidy had already left when the chaplain sent word to Chicago.

The doctor said that Briley would make a full recovery.

After a short repast of tea, sandwiches and cake, Devlin and Cassidy went to the train.

"Where's my trunk?" she asked, looking around.

Devlin smiled. "I paid a steward to put it in the luggage car. I wasn't about to carry it on board."

Cassidy laughed, lifting the two carpetbags and her basket that the sisters had filled with fresh sandwiches and jars of tart lemonade. "What were you going to carry on board?"

Devlin took the two bags from her hand and handed them to one of the trainmen. "Room three, please." The steward nodded and

boarded the train with their luggage. "Are you ready, Mrs. Kingston?"

"I am," she said walking to the train. Devlin grabbed her arm and pulled her around, sweeping her up in his arms.

"Let me carry you on board."

Cassidy laughed and kissed his cheek. "I love you, Devlin."

As he carried her up the steps and down the aisle, he could hear Cassidy apologize as the basket knocked into several people.

"Watch where you are swinging that," someone said.

It didn't matter to Devlin. He lifted his eyes to heaven and praised God for bringing them together.

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Christine Sterling independently published her first book in 2017. She writes sweet and wholesome historical westerns and sweet contemporary small town romance novels. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, a spoiled Shih Tzu, two German Shepherds and an energetic Border Collie, that keep her on her toes.

She spends her time writing, thinking about writing, and dreaming about writing. Her favorite things are a good cup of tea, puppy snuggles, a movie that will make you cry and hearing from her readers.

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